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“*Images de papier*”: Deleuze, Benjamin, Melville

I. The Virtual Collective: The “Distracted Public” in Benjamin

The following remarks are part of an attempt to develop a reading of paper in Melville that takes as its point of departure Walter Benjamin’s writings on the mass media.¹ Everyone is familiar with Benjamin’s work in this area, but it might be worth reiterating a basic point in his writing that continues to prove elusive and relevant. It turns on what Benjamin called the “distracting” character of the mass media. Crucial here is the German word *Zerstreuung*. As manipulated by Benjamin, *Zerstreuung* can describe a condition of individual or psychic distraction but also a state of social or collective dispersal.²

¹ This essay is derived from my broader study of paper – “bank-paper” and “book-paper,” as Carlyle put it (31) – in nineteenth-century Anglo-American fiction, *Paperwork: Fiction and Mass Mediacy in the Paper Age*.

² For an example of Benjamin’s handling of distraction or dispersal (*Zerstreuung*) see section 15 of his famous essay on art and technical reproducibility (see *Kunstwerk*, 39-41; “The Work of Art,” 239-41). “Distracted” echoes the sense of being scattered in the German *zerstreuter* better than “absent-minded,” Zohn’s English translation. For Benjamin such distraction is considered as a condition of possibility for an alternative kind of collective (a key to Benjamin’s work on this topic is in fact the oscillating conflict between distraction and collection – *Zerstreuung* and *Sammlung*). The

Hence the masses, for Benjamin, are at once psychically distracted and socially dispersed by the mass media. Moreover, while resisting organization, containment, conscious control, even consciousness as such, the distracted state induced by mass mediacy tends to elicit a desire for control, again on the psychic and the social levels. Fascism, to take one of Benjamin's examples, tries to exploit this desire for control by offering compensatory images of organization and integrity to masses that are in fact dispersed and distracted. In his writings on culture and literature Benjamin was concerned to explore what he thought of as the revolutionary moment of exposure to the mass media—a moment rapidly annulled by the desire for these images and for the control and security they falsely promise, a moment of exposure we might try to think of as occurring just before we are conscious of wanting to know who we are, where we are and what is happening. Benjamin, in short, was interested in how a certain mediacy marks the masses precisely at the moment when they are not looking, in how the masses are drawn into a zone of distraction disclosed by the mass media, and especially in how at moments of unconscious absorption the masses make up an obscure – Benjamin would say “virtual” – collective. My thesis is that for some writers of fiction in the nineteenth century, such as Melville, the recently industrialized material support of paper betrays some of the distracting effects of mass mediacy as analyzed by Benjamin in his writings on nineteenth-century mass culture and on more recent developments such as radio and film.

II. “Paper Language”

To what extent does the virtual collective of the mass media in Benjamin's work overlap with the concept of virtuality elaborated in the writings of Gilles Deleuze and in particular in Deleuze's influential essay on Melville? This theoretical issue is raised by the reading of paper in Melville that I will propose in what follows. The possibility of a

distracted public for Benjamin is a collective in the sense, not of a self-interested set of individual subjects (a nation or class, for instance), but rather of scattered, yet collectively receptive masses.

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broader connection between Benjamin and Deleuze – writers who share a remarkable set of common concerns (the Baroque, Proust, Kafka, cinematic theory, to name just a few) – is beyond the scope of this paper. Ultimately, though, the key link between Benjamin and Deleuze is the question of virtuality (the philosophical context for both runs from Leibniz and Bergson, passing by way of Kant). A reading of paper in Melville reveals the point where Benjamin and Deleuze overlap as well as where they diverge when it comes to the question of the political implications of their theories of virtuality – in this case the virtuality of the mass media, on the one hand, and of “minor literature,” on the other. With the mass media as with the minor literature we encounter a virtual medium that breaks down subjective agency, releasing new, indeed “revolutionary,” collective potentiality.³ But, as I will argue, this crux turns out to mark precisely where the assessment of mass mediacy proposed by Benjamin is to be distinguished from the minor literary program. For, in spite of the emphasis on virtuality in Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of subjectivity and of a certain monolithic concept of national literature, “minor literature” remains the property of a national literary subject – a revolutionary possibility, as they put it, “in the heart of (*au sein de*) what is called a great (or established) literature” (Deleuze and Guattari, 33; 18). Mass mediacy, by contrast, is encountered as a force that exceeds subjective limits, not only on the level of the individual writer, but also when it comes to the national literary movement. The exceeding of the limits of what might be called a national literary subject becomes explicit in the handling of paper in some of Melville’s works. And, as it turns out, the application of the theory of “minor literature” to Melville unintentionally illustrates this very thesis. For, as Deleuze extends the theory of minor literature to Melville, and in particular to “Bartleby,” he reveals a paper trail leading back to the original description of “minor literature.” Involuntarily,

³ “There isn’t a subject; there are only collective assemblages of enunciation (*agencements collectifs d’énonciation*), and literature expresses these acts (*agencements*) insofar as they’re not imposed from without and insofar as they exist only as diabolical powers to come or revolutionary forces to be constructed” (Deleuze and Guattari, 33; 18). Throughout this essay pages references are first to the original French and then to the English translation.

Deleuze exposes, and is exposed to, a force that withdraws from the national perspective of the minor literary program.

“Minor literature” starts with “paper language” (*langage de papier*). The phrase occurs twice in Deleuze and Guattari’s portrait of Kafka as “minor” writer (30 and 34; 16 and 19). Deleuze and Guattari associate this paper with artificiality or artifice but also with a dryness or poverty of language. The language here is German, more specifically German for the Prague Jews of Kafka’s time.⁴ In this “paper” German, Deleuze and Guattari claim, Kafka discovers a foreign quality, like a foreign language, inhabiting the very language of the major literature. This heterogeneous element on which the “minor” writer works is, moreover, virtual: it is a force activated in the “paper language” of the major literature (Deleuze and Guattari, 30 and 34; 16 and 19). As soon as it is released, however, this force is integrated into the tradition: it is recognized as the actualization of a potentiality “in the heart of the great (or established) literature.” In this way, “minor” works convert “paper language” according to an operation that is overseen by the major, and specifically the national, literary tradition. “Minor literature” is thus always the expression of the potentiality – a property – of a major tradition. In this context, as in representational painting, the virtual “vanishing line” traced by the “minor” work in the end serves to establish a certain phenomenological perspective. Or, to recall the terms of Benjamin’s early study of German Idealism, “minor literature” is the means through which the major literary tradition posits itself dialectically. In this sense, Deleuze and Guattari’s theory ultimately represents a dialectical program for the national literary subject. This is why, unlike the virtual collective of the mass media in Benjamin’s writings, the “potential community” of “minor literature” ultimately has as its horizon consciousness, even if the consciousness in question is that of the collective.⁵ The “minor” work is, to qualify a term taken from

⁴ “Paper language” is described as an “artificial language” (*d’artifice*) (16; 30); as being “arid” (*desséché*) and marked by “impoverishment” (*pauvreté*) (Deleuze and Guattari, 30 and 34; 16 and 19)

⁵ Even the term Deleuze and Guattari substitute for the subject suggests integration and order – *agencements collectifs d’énunciation* (collective assemblages of enunciation) (33; 18), from the French *agencer*, meaning “to

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Deleuze and Guattari, a machine for expressing consciousness (34; 19): the “minor” writer, as they say, is in a position to “forge the means for another consciousness (*conscience*) and another sensibility” (32; 17).

Yet the “paper language” to which Deleuze and Guattari allude cannot be integrated fully into such an operation. This is already suggested by the fact that the phrase “paper language” is a citation in the study of “minor literature.” No external source is identified, but readers of Kafka will find one in a remarkable letter to Max Brod. The passage in question is devoted to the topic of what in German is called *mauscheln*, a verb that might be translated approximately as “to trick” or “to cheat” but also as “to speak with a Yiddish accent.” *Wie ein Mauschel reden* means to speak like a Jew or a Jewish merchant (this presumably is where the accent and the cheating come together in the German word). And, it is important to underline, in spite of its associations with the foreign, *Mauscheln* is a German word (not to be found in what the Germans call *ein Fremdwörterbuch*): it derives from the pronunciation of the name “Moses” with a German accent (Duden). *Mauscheln* (we might translate it in this context as “speaking with an accent”), Kafka argues, “must be taken in the broadest sense”:

namely, as the overt or tacit or even self-pitying appropriation (Anmassung) of foreign property not produced by oneself but rather stolen with a (relatively) passing grab, and the foreign property remains, even if not the slightest linguistic error can be identified . . . Accented speech in itself (Mauscheln an sich) is indeed beautiful; it is an organic binding of paper German and gestural language (eine organische Verbindung von Papierdeutsch und Gebärdensprache).⁶

order,” from the Old French root *gent*, meaning “beautiful” (Larousse). Thus, as is evident from some of his earliest writings, virtuality for Deleuze always includes a moment of “integration.” See, for example, Deleuze on what he calls “global intregation” of the virtual in *Différence et répétition*, 272. On how this differs from Benjamin’s theory of the virtual, see Weber, “Virtualität der Medien.”

⁶ Max Brod/Franz Kafka, 358-62 (letter dated June, 1921). This translation is my own. An English translation of it by Richard and Clara Winston can be found in *Franz Kafka: Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, 288. On “paper” German, see Wagenbach, 51. Wagenbach cites Kafka’s

The term “gestural language” in this passage calls for analysis and commentary that would lead beyond the limits of the argument we are pursuing here. Let us simply note that a good place to begin such an investigation would be with Benjamin’s essay on Kafka. Working with the root of the word “gesture” (also the root of the German *Gebärde*), Benjamin explores the singular character of bearing and of bearers – the many messengers and heralds – in Kafka’s work.⁷ For Benjamin, the singularity of gesture in Kafka lies in that it does not bear consciousness, does not bear the subject in a sense. It would be more accurate to say that in gesture the subject becomes the support for a movement that exceeds subjective limitation.⁸ If in gesture the subject becomes a support, it is therefore fitting that at a certain point the support should become the subject of gesture. This is indeed precisely what happens in a passage Benjamin cites from *The Trial*, a scene in fact in which K becomes the bearer or support for paper.

Slowly, with eyes turned cautiously upward, [K] sought to learn what was happening up there, took one of the papers from the desk without looking at it, laid it on his open hand and raised it up gradually to the gentlemen while himself standing up. In doing so he had no definite purpose, but merely acted with the feeling that this was how he would have to conduct himself when he had finished the great petition that was to exonerate him completely. The Assistant-Manager, who was giving his full attention to the conversation, merely glanced fleetingly at the paper, not at

contemporary, the language philosopher Fritz Mauthner: “Die Deutschen im Innern von Böhmen, umgeben von einer tschechischen Landbevölkerung, spricht ein papiernes Deutsch . . . es mangelt an Fülle der mündartlichen Formen” (Wagenbach, 83; from Fritz Mauthner, *Errinerungen I – Prager Jugendjahre* [Munich, 1918], 51).

⁷ This preoccupation is announced in fact before we even get to Kafka in the way Benjamin approaches his subject in the essay – Pushkin’s story of Schuwalkin is the “herald” of Kafka’s work, he says. And from this perspective it is more than simply accidental that this heralding involves “*Akten*” and “*Papiere*.” For, paper acts primarily as a medium, and as such it also involves, and is involved in, questions of bearing. Thus in the case of the parable from Pushkin one could say with the utmost rigor that what the messenger carries unbeknownst to him is a token of his status as bearer – as Schuwalkin, the one who unknowingly bears his name, “Schuwalkin.”

⁸ On the “subject of paper” in this sense, see Derrida, 239-40.

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all reading over what was there – for what was important to the Chief Clerk was unimportant to him – took it from K.'s hand, said: "Thanks, I already know everything," and calmly laid it back on the table.

K's gesture, his bearing of paper, in this scene is thus characterized by the aimlessness and lack of consciousness typical of gesture in Kafka. He has "no definite purpose," does not look at the paper he rather compulsively bears. We might say that paper is supported by, but does not become the focus, of the gesture. Benjamin introduces K's bearing with the adverb "half unknowingly" [*Halbunwissend*]. Paper in this scene is not a medium of consciousness – it is a medium of gesture. Or, as Benjamin might put it, paper communicates itself in gesture, and vice versa. But it is also significant that the particular paper in this scene, issue of the bureaucratic machinery of what Carlyle called "the Paper Age," is also linked to the source of "paper language" in "Bartleby," namely to Dickens *Bleak House*.⁹

III "Bartleby," or the Gesture

By suggesting a connection between "paper language" and the mass media "gestural language" hints at what becomes the key question in "Bartleby." This connection can be seen to escape the national literary perspective of "minor literature," as we will see if we follow Deleuze as he attempts to extend this perspective in his interpretation of Melville as an American writer. The point of extension is "paper language." Bartleby's "formula" is taken as a specimen of the "dry," "impoverished" language to which Kafka alludes in his letter. Like the German of the Prague Jews, Bartleby's "formula" is marked by a

⁹ Kafka's admiration for Dickens and the possibility that *Bleak House* was a source for *The Trial* are the subject of a number of studies (see Tambling, 195-98; Suchoff, 136-37; and Spilke, 242. Deleuze and Guattari analyze *The Trial* as a bureaucracy 79-96; 43-52 and especially 105-07; 57-58. Especially significant is that the bureaucratic machine's "virtual movement" is being "already real even though it is not yet in existence" (*le mouvement virtuel, qui est déjà réel sans être actuel*) (107; 58). This corresponds to the dialectical logic mentioned above, what Deleuze and Guattari call "the field of immanence" (52)

certain “mannerism,” even if it is “grammatically and syntactically correct” (Deleuze, “Bartleby,” 89; 68). It has a foreign element: “the formula,” Deleuze observes, “is like a bad translation of a foreign language . . . it carves into the language a sort of foreign language” (Deleuze, “Bartleby,” 93; 71). Bartleby’s language is, in other words, “deterritorialized.” It is also, secondly, politicized, and thoroughly so in its absolute refusal of choice and position. The formula refuses politics by obviating will. It is “not a will to nothingness,” as Deleuze puts it in one of the most trenchant passages in his essay, “but the emergence of a nothingness of will” (*un néant de volonté*; Deleuze, “Bartleby,” 92; 71).¹⁰ With this we come to the third and final component of the formula, its collective element: in what manner does Bartleby’s “paper language” become the medium of an “alternative potential community”? This third part of Deleuze’s triad, of his multiple triads in fact, is crucial for us. At this juncture the national cast of the minor literary program enters the scene.

The argument on the national level, in short, comes down to the following: the “foreign language in the language” of the English tradition is American (in the sense that French translations are still sometimes said to be “from the American” –*traduit de l’américain*). In this framework Bartleby [the character] represents the “vanishing line”

¹⁰ This “nothingness of will” (*un néant de volonté*) is what Giorgio Agamben has called “absolute potentiality”: “As a scribe who has stopped writing, Bartleby is the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives; and at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of this Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality. . . . The formula that he so obstinately repeats destroys all possibility of constructing a relation between being able and willing, between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*. It is the formula of potentiality” (Agamben, 253-55). Agamben identifies the “source” of this formula in “a text that was familiar to every cultured man of the nineteenth century (he provides no source to support the claim that Melville was “cultured”): Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. We are referring to the expression *ou mallon*, “no more than,” the technical term with which the Skeptics denoted their most characteristic experience: *epokhe*, suspension” (Agamben, 256). Agamben does not consider the possibility that instead of deliberately deriving the formula from a traditional philosophical source, Melville might simply have picked it up, as it were, in a passing conversation, a newspaper, a serial novel, etc. Of course, if Melville did just pick it up, even unconsciously, this would not preclude the possibility that it also translated the phrase from Diogenes Laertes.

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where the major English tradition is “minorized” as American literature. Bartleby emerges in the tale like “something strange,” an “unknown element” in the tradition of English literature: “Everything began *à l’anglaise* but continues *à l’américaine*, following an irresistible line of flight” (*Tout commençait à l’anglaise, mais on continue à l’américaine, suivant une ligne de fuite irrésistible*; Deleuze, “Bartleby,” 99; 77). This is indeed where “things start to become interesting” (Deleuze, “Bartleby,” 99; 77). For, as Deleuze begins to make this point paper resurfaces, specifically, in connection with the narrator’s description of his efficient management of the two perfectly complementary office clerks (Nippers and Turkey). “The two clerks,” Deleuze observes, “are like paper images (*images de papier*), symmetrically inverse, and the narrator fulfills his paternal function so well that we can scarcely believe we are in New York. Everything begins as in an English novel, in London and in Dickens” (Deleuze, “Bartleby,” 99 77). The clerks are “images of paper,” it seems, in that they appear as formalized types. They are presented in a conceptual and literary language that is dry and impoverished – a “paper language,” as it were. And here, Deleuze emphasizes, the language is English, or more precisely the language of England. Better still, the language of the novels of England. At this point, in other words, we are in a Dickens novel. Not really, though. For, Melville is working on the “paper language” of a Dickens novel in such a way that it is becoming American by “following an irresistible line of flight.” This is where Bartleby comes in. But who, with the exception perhaps of the narrator, is more closely associated with paper than Bartleby in the tale? Deleuze’s application of the phrase – of the formula – “paper image” to the English treatment of the clerks is dictated by the nationalizing logic of “minor literature.” Indeed paper is linked to the concept of the nation-state represented here by England (elsewhere it is represented by the French or the European, in contrast with the Anglo-Saxon, tradition).¹¹ It is imperative that the nation-state be represented and that this representation take the form of a paper image. Otherwise, “minor literature” could not convert the “paper language” of the nation-

¹¹ See Deleuze, “Bartleby,” 104-105); *Critique*, 76 and Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, 48.

state into a medium of an alternative potential community that is not subject to paternalism or oedipalization, which in this context means not subject to England in this context (see Deleuze, "Bartleby," 113, n. 19; 193, n. 25).¹² Because it must be representational and convertible – in short, a metaphor – and because it must represent the nation-state, paper must never be associated with American literature for Deleuze. This explains why the phrase "paper image" returns at the end of the essay to mark the failure of the America Revolution as it turns into the "restoration" of the nation-state:

The dangers of a "society without fathers" have often been pointed out, but the only real danger is the return of the father. In this respect, it is difficult to separate the failure of the two revolutions, the American and the Soviet, the pragmatic and the dialectical. Universal emigration was no more successful than universal proletarianization. The Civil War already sounded the knell, as would the liquidation of the Soviets later on. The birth of a nation, the restoration of the nation-state – and the monstrous fathers come galloping back in, while the sons without fathers start dying off again. Paper images (images de papier) – this is the fate of the American as well as the Proletarian. (Deleuze, "Bartleby," 113; 88).

What prevents or resists the "paper image" of the nation-state is a certain engagement with the virtual movement of what might be called revolutionary potentiality. In Melville's fiction, Deleuze argues, this is the role played by the figure of the "prophet" (another of Deleuze's third terms). A detailed analysis of Deleuze's characterization of the prophet's engagement with revolutionary potentiality would discover the same vocabulary and logic that we described before in "minor literature." If, as Deleuze announces, the prophet in Melville (and the narrator in "Bartleby") "has seen so much," this prophetic vision remains within the phenomenological horizon of a subject that "recognizes" (*reconnaître*) "vanishing lines" and that "reconciles" (*reconcilier*)

¹² The main source of this interpretation of American literature is English: D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, from which all of Deleuze's writing on American letters derives (see especially the chapter entitled "The Spirit of Place" (Lawrence, 7-14).

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oppositions such as the “human” and the “non-human” (Deleuze, “Bartleby,” 106-107; 83-84). What remains, in other words, is a dialectical logic of “integration” (the term “integration” almost always appears in connection with the virtual in Deleuze, again as a third and final step in a progression).¹³ In “Bartleby” American literature is seen to posit itself by converting the false “paper language” into a means through which a virtual movement can be integrated without becoming stationary and, as it were, static. As an example of the latter, Deleuze alludes at the end of his essay to the false community of Melville’s “Paradise of Bachelors,” a group whose counterfeit bond is based on the exploitation of the factory girls portrayed in the companion tale, “The Tartarus of Maids.” But if the bachelors represent the failed revolutionary promise of America, how do we explain the fact that they are explicitly presented in the tale as British? Perhaps the best illustration of American failure – of an American as a “paper image” – is England. Yet what are we to make of the fact that the maids of the linked tale are workers in an American paper factory? The problem is the following: if paper is associated with America in Melville – and every term in this proposition would have to be qualified – the paper in question represents neither the artificial formal medium of the nation-state (a static medium) nor the medium of a genuine integration of a virtual movement like a work of “minor literature.” “Paper language” in Melville is handled differently, as we will see if we look more closely at “Bartleby” and the companion tales to which Deleuze refers at the end of his essay on Melville.

Melville may have gotten some of the material for “Bartleby” from the newspaper (“Bartleby” was itself published serially in *Putnam’s Magazine* in 1853). He may, for example, have read the first installment

¹³ This stress on integration could be traced back through *Foucault*, 45 to *Différence et Répétition*, 269-71. This stress on integration is suggested by another example of the paper trail. The figure of the articulated skeleton and the “spinal cord” is linked figuratively to a paper cutout (emphasizing formal integrity): from the study of “minor literature” to the essay on Bartleby: “... [Kafka] will abandon sense, render it no more than implicit; he will retain only the skeleton of sense, or a paper cutout (*une silhouette de papier*)” (check to see if this phrase occurs in the French translation of “Bartleby”; Deleuze and Guattari, 37; 21): “... Not a skull but the vertebral column, a spinal cord” (Deleuze, “Bartleby,” 110-111; 86).

of James A. Maitland's *The Lawyer's Story* in the *New York Tribune* or in the *New York Times* in February of 1853.¹⁴ Or he may have derived the paragraph at the end of the tale about the Dead Letter Office from "sentimental accounts" in various newspapers at this time.¹⁵ Or he might have picked up elements of the tale's basic formula – specifically, the parts of the Bartleby and the narrator – from his reading of the early serial installment of Dickens's *Bleak House* published in 1853 in *Harper's Magazine*, a periodical to which Melville had recently resubscribed. This final possibility suggests that, if Bartleby and the narrator are clearly associated with paper, and indeed by way of paper, neither is entirely American. The narrator's practice of Chancery law and Bartleby's law copying hint at links to Dickens's novel (it is thus for good reason that we feel like we might be in London in Melville's tale). Chancery Court and Nemo, the law copier in *Bleak House*, are of course also profoundly connected to paper. In Dickens's novel paper is a medium of disintegration. Here too paper obviates will. It could be argued that ultimately *Bleak House* brings this disintegrating force under arrest by instituting paternal authority, though the complexity of this operation may point in other directions.¹⁶ But of course Melville might simply have stopped reading the serial installments of *Bleak House* when the law copier is introduced, and at that point there is no counter-force in sight to bring closure to the "paper language" of Chancery Court, or of Dickens novel for that matter. Or maybe he did not pay attention sufficiently to the later scenes when John Jarndyce pulls things together. This is, after all, the problem with such novels, as Poe pointed out in his theory of the short story: one simply cannot concentrate, they are too long, too distracting.¹⁷ The point is that the Britishness of Melville's story and of its "paper language" extends not just to the clerks, as Deleuze proposes, but also to Bartleby – the "unknown element," the "strange something" – and to the narrator.

¹⁴ See Bergmann.

¹⁵ See Monteiro; Parker, "Dead Letters" and "The 'Sequel.'" On all of these possible sources, see the note on "Bartleby" in Melville, *Writings, The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860*.

¹⁶ See my "Losing One's Place," especially 884-85 and 887-88.

¹⁷ Poe, "Review of Twice-Told Tales, by Nathaniel Hawthorne," 521-22.

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In other words, as in “The Man of the Crowd,” Melville’s “Poeish tale,” as it was called by one contemporary reviewer, seems to stage an interaction between its author and Dickens, once again as a “paper exchange.”¹⁸ Melville gets a certain impression of paper from Dickens. Or, not so much from Dickens as from the force of mass mediacy into which *Bleak House* is itself drawn. Such mediacy exceeds national limits, as we have seen and as Dickens himself knew very well, somewhat to his chagrin.¹⁹ Melville’s “Bartleby” would in this way, like Poe’s short story, show how the concentration of the tale ultimately displays the distracting force that in Poe it is supposed to contain. Bartleby’s “paper language” marks the spot – the dead spot – where the literary medium of Melville’s tale is exposed to a mass mediacy that cannot be integrated into a national literary movement conceptualized in terms of a reflexive self-consciousness. This exposure is dramatized in the tale on the level of the individual subject by the narrator’s encounter with Bartleby, more precisely, with the disintegrating force that Bartleby supports and that the clerks and in turn the narrator himself come involuntarily to support, as they discover when they display the impression the disarticulating formula has made on them. The impression is disarticulating in that it disintegrates grammatically and syntactically – it is not a self-consistent linguistic unit – and in that it disintegrates the self-consistency of its support – in this case, the self-conscious and self-contained subjectivity of supposedly individual subjects. The impression in question, then, extends beyond all self-contained individuality and, accordingly, it precedes the appearance of Bartleby. It is legible in the narrator, even before he introduces himself as a paper-pushing Chancery lawyer, in the dry and artificial legalism – a bit of “paper language” – “Imprimis,” a term that itself literally combines initiality and impression (Melville, “Bartleby,” 3). This continues through the physiognomic, Dickensian sketches of the two clerks, types that also recall those employed at the beginning of “The Man of the Crowd.” And on it goes right through the “sentimental”

¹⁸ On the remark “Poeish tale,” see Melville, *Writings, The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860*, 576.

¹⁹ See Dickens’s concerns about the piracy of his novels in America (in *American Notes*), see McGill, 111-40.

passage on dead letters, a paragraph that might very well be the effect of impressions left on Melville by the newspaper. If the narrator is a prophet, it is not because he “sees so much,” but rather because he sees so little of what he is supporting when it comes to Bartleby.

IV. The Disassembling Collective

Such disintegrating mass mediacy is virtual in that it does not present itself in the form of self-consistent things and characters, but instead traverses and interrupts self-consistency in the manner of Bartleby. What Melville’s narrator relates in this sense is the origin of the tale as the disintegration or withdrawal of self-consistency and specifically of self-consistent supports – in short, the withdrawal of paper. This holds with regard to the collective as well. The withdrawal means that paper is neither a static medium (of the nation-state) nor a dynamic medium (of the “minor literature”), but rather a medium of a potentiality pure to the point of refusing to actualize, not just the nation-state, but also the nation, a virtuality that cannot be conceptualized as a property of a self-positing nation. This is what happens most explicitly in Melville’s companion tales, “The Paradise of Bachelors” and “The Tartarus of Maids.” Together, these tales break down the distinction between isomorphically British and American contexts. Moreover, here again paper is the support for the disintegrating force that moves between and through the stories. Such breakdown is part of a broader project in Melville’s work that runs from the set of three companion tales of the 1850s and *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* (1852) through *Israel Potter* (1853) and the posthumous *Billy Budd* (1891). Even *Moby Dick* (1851), the work perhaps most often taken to embody American literature, is crossed by the failure of the American reduction of transnational forces, as I will indicate in a minute.²⁰ To put it briefly, in “The Paradise of Bachelors” and “The

²⁰ A brief summary of the tale may be in order. In “The Tartarus of Maids,” a seed merchant narrates his visit to a paper mill in Western Massachusetts to buy envelopes to mass market his seeds. In the course of the tale he associates this visit with the account of a dinner party in a lawyers club in London provided in “The Paradise of Bachelors.” For some examples of where

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Tartarus of Maids,” the British and American settings are scrambled. Not only do the supposed distinct locations merge so that urban scenes in London reappear in rural Massachusetts, but on the most general level the Old World and the New World become reversible. This is underlined, first of all by the titles of the tales, in which the Old World (England) is referred to a more modern mythological context (Paradise) and vice versa; the New World (America) is given the older name (Tartarus). This feature is also evident in the literary allusions to eighteenth-century satirical writing (Pope’s *Rape of the Lock* comes to mind) in the London story and to Dante in the tale of Massachusetts. Moreover, these confusing patterns emerge as the second tale takes up in terms of insemination and the bearing of seeds the question of impression and support we have encountered in “Bartleby.” There are several obvious parallels here, including the invocation of the traditional Pauline distinction between spirit and letter, already implied in a sense by the reference to Dante at the outset, and of course the encounter with a paper machine. It all comes down to the fact that, as with the narrator of “Bartleby,” what the seedsman encounters at the paper mill does not support divine logos. In the seedsman’s visit to the paper mill there is no reappearance of the divine logos, but instead the endless reproduction of blank paper issuing from a paper machine:

Looking at that blank paper continually dropping, dropping, dropping, my mind ran on in wonderings of those strange uses to which those thousand sheets eventually would be put. All sorts of writings would be writ on those now vacant things – sermons, marriage certificates, bills of divorce, registers of births, death-warrants, and so on, without end. Then, recurring back to them as they here lay all blank, I could not but bethink me of that celebrated comparison of John Locke, who, in demonstration of his theory that man had no innate ideas, compared the human mind at birth to a sheet of paper; something destined to be scribbled on, but what sort of characters no soul might tell. (Melville, “The Paradise of Bachelors,” 284).

the New World resembles the Old, see 275 and 280. Melville, “The Paradise of Bachelors,” 284.

Confronted by the revolutions of the paper machine, Melville's narrator turns over in his mind a revision of Locke's metaphor for the mind that involves seeing it, not just as paper, but as mass-produced paper. In place of the uniqueness and finitude of the self-consistent sheet of paper, he sees instead the plurality and infinitude of paper "without end." The narrator becomes involved in a mode of production that has nothing in particular to do with subjective consciousness – the machine has nothing in mind for the subject. And it is precisely the panic induced by this threatening absence that leads the narrator to seize upon Locke's metaphor and, like his counterpart in "Bartleby," to try to endow the machine with a mind or a soul. The machine, however, refuses the offer and, perhaps most importantly, refuses to reciprocate by giving back or mirroring to the narrator his image – Locke's image – of the mind. This "crisis of reciprocity," as Benjamin calls it, is the whole point of Melville's tale, which narrates the origins, not so much of self-consciousness, as of the medium of the tale itself – the origins of its lack of self-consistency and integrity.

The shift from self-consistent subjectivity to the infinitely divisible medium also operates on the collective level. Here the repression of subjective breakdown dramatized by the narrator's allusion to Locke's metaphor would manifest itself in an effort to repress the related breakdown of the self-contained national entities (England and America). If the interpenetrating tales are designed precisely to work against such efforts, paper is what might be called the disarticulating link between them. This is what makes the narrator's allusion to Locke's image of the mind as a "sheet of white paper" so peculiarly telling. For, there is no prophetic vision here, no integrating moment of recognition or reconciliation, just as there is no reappearance of divine logos in the sheets of mechanically reproduced sheets of paper that will bear the narrator's seeds, among many other things. What the narrator of "The Tartarus of Maids" sees in the paper mill is anything but a machine for consciousness. Or rather, this is exactly what he does not see when he seizes on the traditional Lockean metaphor of the mind as a "sheet of white paper." The metaphorical repression here is similar to the one that occurs when a white sperm whale is taken as a metaphor for a divine will or logos that is in fact at

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the very point of withdrawal. And this is precisely what happens in the scene in *Moby Dick* in which the whale blubber is cut and falls “fast as the sheets from a rapt orator’s desk. Arrayed in decent black; occupying a conspicuous pulpit; intent on bible leaves; what a candidate for an archbishoprick, what a lad for a Pope were this mincer” (325). In what is often proclaimed to be the quintessentially American novel, as in the tales I have discussed, the encounter with paper stages the repressed breakdown of a self-consistent, self-contained subjectivity on the individual as well as on the collective level. In Melville’s fiction paper is not the semblance of the nation-state, as Deleuze (and others) have argued: it is not the point where the revolutionary forces of a given collective take flight on a virtual “vanishing line,” giving rise to alternative “collective assemblages” (*agencement collectifs*), as Deleuze calls them. Paper in Melville is rather precisely at the breaking point where the national collective disassembles.

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