The Eye and the Pyramid: The Economy of Death in Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

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Abstract

The homogeneity of the world, which is the dream of Western philosophy, science, and technology, is a nightmare. What confronts Bartleby, the scrivener in the Wall Street, is the same nightmarish world in which capitalist system attempts to master every heterogeneous element by incorporating, assimilating, or digesting all differences. Bartleby’s resistance to the system exposes a radical otherness that can never be domesticated or redeemed by the system. In other words, he is the irreducible waste product of various systematic operations or the excrement of the system that constitutes its blind spot. Imprisoned by the surrounding walls in the Wall Street and under the constant surveillance of the narrator’s eye, the copyists work diligently, complying with the economic rationality (of which the narrator is the agent) that must calculate the penalty and the reward and prescribe the appropriate techniques. Their bodies are then directly involved in the political field, as power relations have an immediate hold upon them, mark them, train them, and force them to carry out tasks and emit signs. However, the perverse Bartleby refuses to work. His existence constitutes an affront to the dominant metapsychology of Western civilization (at least, since the eighteenth century)
and the assumption that we understand and control all men by self-interest. Marxism as well as "classical" politico-economic theory, utilitarian ethics as well as applied Christian morality, largely depend on the appeals to an organizable form of selfishness. But the man-from-the-underground or a Bartleby militantly denies all such appeals, and with absurd arrogance and the wisdom of failure refuses the motivations and resists the ethics of self-interest. The outrageousness of the act puts a grim cast of repression on all of the ostensibly rational orders. The psychological and ethical tactics lose their benevolent appearance and reveal a tyrannical warping of the human and a destruction of freedom, as those lonely creatures like Bartleby who insist on the primacy of preference and will end their subterranean lives in perversity and self-destruction. A sardonic pathos qualifies their exalted claims to individuality and unconditioned freedom.

Key words: architecture Bartleby expenditure gaze panopticon pyramid the economy of death

A copy clerk in a New York law office, Bartleby stubbornly and mysteriously refuses to do his work and even to explain why he refuses. As he tells his employer, a decent and reasonable attorney, "I would prefer not to be a little reasonable" (30)\(^1\). Finally, he prefers to accusingly haunt the office until hauled off to prison, where he ends his miserable life by preferring even not to live. Melville focuses primarily on the benevolently rationalizing and patronizing figure of authority; to him, as to the reader, the perverse clerk must remain enigmatic, a moral and intellectual perplexity. But as an enigmatic other,

\(^1\) All quotations from and references to "Bartleby, the Scrivener" are based on Northwestern University Press edition of The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860.
the figure of Bartleby insistently invites and defeats interpretation, in spite of the narrator’s warning in the first paragraph:

While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing was ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case those are very small. What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, that is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report which will appear in the sequel. (13; emphasis added)

As the origin of Bartleby is unknown to the narrator, what the narrator tells about Bartleby is in fact a supplement that both displaces the origin and defers its full presence. Furthermore, the fact that Bartleby is a scrivener implies he is subject to the “tracing,” “spacing” of writing, which, according to Derrida, is the endless play of differance (Margins 3ff), even though he is a dead signifier as the fact that he once worked in the Dead Letter Office may suggest (45). Tracing, which means the copying of the original, provides a fine example for the critical play of difference and deferment inscribed in and by writing, for it has two mutually contradictory meanings: “going back to the origin” and “replacing the original with its simulacrum.” Therefore, what the narrator tells about Bartleby is always already a re-inscription that will displace the original, the real Bartleby, if the category of the real or the original does exist as the original sin once did.

On the other hand, the tracing of institutional or institutionalized violence is in operation from the beginning of the story to its end. What the narrator has tried to do after he hired Bartleby is, in a word, to put the latter in surveillance under his astonished eye/I and thereby to incorporate him into the dominant social system, a system based on the economy of semiotic difference and differentiation.
The word “incorporate,” which is derived from the Latin *corpus* (body), deserves careful deliberation in this context. It may mean the tracing, marking, cutting of institutionalized and/or institutional violence on the “natural” body, and the transformation of that body into a “human” body, which means nothing but a useful and productive body in “Bartleby.” In order to make it work, some rearrangement of the body as adequately segmented space is needed. Hence, in re-presenting Bartleby the methodic, prudent narrator stresses the importance of the general surroundings. He writes,

Ere introducing the scrivener, as he first appeared to me, it is fit I make some mention of myself, my employés, my chambers, and general surroundings; because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented. . . . My chambers were up stairs at No. -- Wall-street. At one end they looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious sky-light shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom. This view might have been considered rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call “life.” But if so, the view from the other end of my chambers commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade . . . Owing to the great height of the surrounding buildings, and my chambers being on the second floor, the interval between this wall and mine not a little resembled a huge square cistern. (13-14)

The copyists’ room is divided from the master’s by folding doors, which may be thrown open or closed depending on the master’s humor. Bartleby is assigned a corner by the folding doors, where, hiding behind a high green folding screen, he is entirely isolated from the master’s sight but not from his voice (19). The space of the office is thus meticulously arranged. Its fundamental reference is
not to the state of nature but to permanent coercions, not to fundamental rights or
to the general will, but to infinitely progressive forms of training and to automatic
docility. The functions of the building and its offices are in fact much similar to
or even identical with those of Jeremy Bentham's famous panopticon, a circular
building enclosing a central inspection tower that was recommended and
implemented for all institutions, including prison, hospital, and workshop.
Tracking the history of the penal system, Foucault says in *Discipline and Punish*
that the operation of power is not triumphant, excessive, omnipotent, but modest,
suspicious, calculating. It operates through hierarchical observation,
normalizing judgment, and their combination in the examination (200ff). A new
kind of architecture was then required: one that would make it possible for those
who are on the inside to be kept under continuous observation. The perfect
disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything
constantly and without being seen (202). It was precisely these requirements
that were met by Bentham's panopticon (a word recalling the panoptic, all-seeing
eye of God), which, says Foucault, is not just a "dream," but also the diagram of a
mechanism of power reduced to an ideal form. In the panopticon, the inmate of
each cell is in full view of the central observer, himself unseen. The inmate
never knows when he is being observed and, therefore, behaves at all times as if
he is. A state of conscious and permanent visibility thus assures the automatic
functioning of the power (202). The massive architecture of the old prisons, in
which prisoners were kept crammed together in darkness, could be replaced by a
light structure in which the inmates were separated and permanently on view.
But the panopticon was intended not only for prison: it was readily adaptable to
any closed institution, like schools and workshops. As Foucault writes, "Among
workers, it makes it possible to note the aptitude of each worker, compare the
time he takes to perform a task, and if they are paid by the day, to calculate their
wages" (203).

The totalizing nusus of reason, of which the panopticon is the ideal form,
eventually produces the totalitarianism of the modern state. Anticipating Foucault, Bataille maintains that reason extends its repressive and regressive activity in modern science and technology. In the course of analyzing “the public square” in the midst of the modern metropolis, Bataille writes,

The homogeneity of the kind realized in cities between men and that which surrounds them is only a subsidiary form of a much more consistent homogeneity, which man has established throughout the external world by everywhere replacing a priori inconceivable objects with classified series of conceptions or ideas. . . . This last appropriation—the work of philosophy as well as of science or common sense—has included phases of revolt and scandal, but it has always had as its goal the establishment of the homogeneity of the world, and it will only be able to lead to a terminal phase in the sense of excretion when the irreducible waste products of the operation are determined. (Visions 95-96)

The homogeneity of the world, which is the dream of Western philosophy, science, and technology, is, for Bataille, a nightmare. And what confronts Bartleby in the Wall Street is the same nightmarish world in which capitalist system attempts to master every other by incorporating, assimilating, or digesting all differences. However, Bartleby’s resistance to the System exposes a radical otherness that can never be domesticated or redeemed by the System. In other words, he is the irreducible waste product of various systematic operations or the excrement of the System that constitutes its blind spot. Imprisoned by the surrounding walls in the Wall Street, and under the constant surveillance of the narrator’s eye and the pure form of light from the spacious airshaft or from a very small opening in a dome, the copyists make copies “at the usual rate of four cents a folio (one hundred words)” (25). They work, complying with the “economic” rationality (of
which the narrator is the agent) that must calculate the penalty and the reward and prescribe the appropriate techniques. Their bodies are then directly involved in the political field, as power relations have an immediate hold upon them, mark them, train them, and force them to carry out tasks and emit signs. As Foucault writes: "The political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination" (25-26). "Humanity" is then the respectable name given to this economy and to its meticulous calculations (92).

However, the perverse Bartleby refuses to work. His existence then constitutes an affront to the dominant metapsychology of Western civilization (at least, since the eighteenth century) and the assumption that we understand and control all men by self-interest. Marxism as well as "classical" politico-economic theory, utilitarian ethics as well as applied Christian morality, largely depend on the appeals to an organizable form of selfishness. But the man-from-the-underground or a Bartleby militantly denies all such appeals, and with absurd arrogance and the wisdom of failure refuses the motivations and the ethics of self-interest. The psychological and ethical tactics lose their benevolent appearance and reveal a tyrannical warping of the human and the destruction of freedom, while those lonely creatures like Bartleby who insist on the primacy of preference and will end their subterranean lives in perversity and self-destruction. A sardonic pathos qualifies their exalted claims to individuality and unconditioned freedom.

The suffering of the "pallidly neat, pitiabley respectable, incurably forlorn" (19) copyist is wholly inward, private, and incommunicable. It springs, his easy-going employer guesses, not from "innate and incurable disorder" (29) of the mind but from long contemplation of a pointless existence in a meaningless universe. The other occupants of the office live out their mechanical lives completely undisturbed by the lifeless prospect about them--the white wall of an
airshaft at one window and the black wall of a warehouse pushed up within ten feet of the other. Bartleby cannot. As Ahab saw in the white whale’s featureless brow reality’s wall “shoved near me” (Moby-Dick 262), so Bartleby in his “dead-wall reveries” (31) vainly searches the blank for some hint of meaning. But where Ahab ends his life by “thrusting through the wall” in an attempt to strike the mocking thing “behind the unreasoning mask” (262), Bartleby’s response is simply to withhold his consent to such a life: “I would prefer not to.” Having once reached his decision, he returns the same indifferent answer to both entreaty and command from his employer, the police, and his jailer, and finally, by his refusal to eat, to life itself. And in the name of humanity, the narrator tries to cure Bartleby of his “mental disorder” in order that he may be reinstated in the chain of production.

Practically all of the narrator’s responses to Bartleby take the form of appeals to common usage and common sense (22). In other words, the narrator appeals to what he assumes will be a homogeneous system of values, a shared frame of reference within which all reasonable men agree that life in this world must be constructed. Turkey and Nippers, of course, and even young Ginger Nut, share the narrator’s sense of values and therefore take his side against Bartleby; Nippers for one insists that never again will he “do another man’s business without pay” (23). The narrator in fact has no resources other than the mental functions that constitute the basis of his profession and that are the basis of American democracy. In other words, the narrator could do nothing but trust the power of reason; therefore, when Bartleby refuses to do the work he is asked to, the narrator says: “how could a human creature with the common infirmities of our nature, refrain from bitterly exclaiming upon such perverseness—such unreasonableness” (26). The loss of reason, which is synonymous with the loss of soul in the post-Enlightenment eras, becomes part of his accusations of Bartleby.

According to Foucault, the entry of the “soul” on to the scene of penal
justice was made possible by the investment of the body by power relations. Extreme forms of violence inflicted on the body may have diminished or even disappeared, but they have been replaced by complex, subtle forms of correction and training that are always directed at the body. This “micro-physics of power” is operated, then, through the “soul,” on the body. The “soul” is to be understood not in the Christian sense of a soul born in sin and subject to punishment, but as the creation of methods of punishment, supervision, and constraint. Foucault writes,

[The soul] is the element in which are articulated the effects of a certain type of power and the reference of a certain type of knowledge, the machinery by which the power relations give rise to a possible corpus of knowledge, and knowledge extends and reinforces the effects of this power. On this reality reference, various concepts have been constructed and domains of analysis carved out: psyche, subjectivity, personality, consciousness, etc.; on it have been built scientific techniques and discourses, and the moral claims of humanism. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body. (29-30)

The “mind,” that is, the soul, becomes a surface of inscription for power, with semiology as its tool; the body submits to the system through the control of ideas and becomes the *body politic*. As Foucault says: “A stupid despot may constrain his slaves with iron chains; but a true politician binds them even more strongly by the chain of their own ideas; it is at the stable point of reason that he secures the end of the chain. . . . ‘[O]n the soft fibres of the brain is founded the unshakable base of the soundest of the Empires’” (102-103). Asserting the importance of common usage, common sense, and common humanity, the narrator of “Bartleby” actually plays the role of the judge of normality. While trying to convert the
idling Bartleby to capitalist work ethics, the narrator is acting the role of the boss-judge, the doctor-judge, the psychiatrist-judge, and the educator-judge. He is an agent of what Foucault calls the “carceral network” which “in its compact or disseminated forms, with its systems of insertion, distribution, surveillance, observation, has been the greatest support, in modern society, of normalizing power” (304).

Representing the cohesive and coercive normalizing power of the society, the narrator inevitably presents a distorted sense of fellow feeling. Even before Bartleby appears in the story, the narrator has presented himself as sensitive to fellow feeling. For example, he tolerates Turkey’s inkblots on the basis of fellow feeling (15). This sounds commendable, but shortly he confuses fellow feeling with charity and by charity means the giving of gifts from a superior to an inferior. He cannot understand why Turkey does not appreciate the gift of an old coat; baffled, he reports that Turkey becomes insolent instead of grateful. He does not perceive the indignity that Turkey feels and therefore self-righteously assures himself that Turkey is “a man whom prosperity harmed” (18). For him, the gift given away is an investment that should produce profits or interests. But Turkey fails to give anything in return and is therefore condemned by him.

At a crucial moment in the narrator’s relationship to Bartleby he falls back on his notion of common humanity. He faces his first decision about how to handle Bartleby when it has become clear that Bartleby is not going to work but is staying in the office at night and on weekends, and probably forever. The narrator says, “For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not-unpleasing sadness. The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam” (28). One should not, of course, underestimate the potential significance of someone’s genuinely feeling a common humanity, and the narrator’s perception that he and Bartleby are both “sons of Adam” does lead him
to a humanitarian attempt to tolerate Bartleby. Somewhat later, when melancholy has turned to fear and then fear and pity into repulsion, the narrator tries to explain how he came to be repulsed by the figure of the man whose melancholy he had shared or thought he had shared:

So true it is and so terrible too, that up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but in certain special cases, beyond that point it does not. They err who would assert that invariably this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart. It rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic will. (29)

The narrator actually rejects the explanation of “inherent selfishness” which raises itself as a possibility, and in the place of this potentially discomfiting judgment chooses to apply the standard of the ordinary man in his everyday life (“common sense”). By these standards he decides that pity and pain are so closely interwoven that they must be written off if they cannot be resolved tidily. And perhaps now it is clear why he feels “disqualified . . . for the time from churchgoing” (29). It appears that he senses he has written off the human soul: “I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach” (29). If the body is not worth succoring and the soul cannot be touched, then the church can say nothing to the narrator. So he walks about Wall Street--the preeminent street of shared economic values--instead.

Later the narrator cites what he calls “the Divine injunction” from the New Testament:

“A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.”

Yes, this it was that saved me. Aside from higher considerations,
charity often operates as a vastly wise and prudent principle—a great safeguard to its possessor. . . . No man . . . ever committed a diabolical murder for sweet charity’s sake. *Mere self interest*, then, if no better motive can be enlisted, should, especially with high-tempered men, prompt all beings to charity and philanthropy (36; emphases added)

Instead of hearing the “Divine injunction” as a word of new possibility, the narrator simplistically accepts as immutable his current vision of reality. Therefore, it is perfectly appropriate that soon he finds comfort in the philosophies of Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Priestley, both of whom argued that a genuinely free will is philosophically inconceivable and pragmatically undesirable and that human wills are determined by a multitude of causes over which people have no control (Emery 170ff). However, just when the narrator feels that the idea of a predestined fate may allow him a peaceful relationship with Bartleby, he begins to be especially sensitive to the criticism of his Wall Street colleagues. When he explains why he has accepted their view of his limited responsibility to Bartleby, his notion of conscience reflects the self-centered assumptions of the capitalist society.

The capitalist system develops as a process of pure assimilation, an assimilation that would not tolerate any unrestricted expenditure without any possible return of profits. But if the system is at work in this assimilation, which is based on homogenization, identification, and reproduction, it is basically because assimilation provides an exceedingly fine definition for humanity’s mode of existence. There is no more insatiable assimilator than the human being: anything in the outside world that might provide a welcoming structure for otherness is submitted to voracious conquest; the monotonous infinitude of modern techniques has no other mission, no other vocation than this assimilation of the other at no matter what the cost through conceptual totalization. Driven
by a unilateral devouring action, the ravenous imperialistic capitalism reduces everything to itself, and keeps whatever it has assimilated in the very face of humanity, just as contrasted to the pure expenditure of energy that is the sun's entire existence, the earth seems the most avaricious planet of all, one that captures and profits from solar warmth strictly for its own internal purposes. As Bataille writes: "The Earth, as a celestial body, differs from a star by being cold and not shining . . . the absence of shining, the cold, abandons the surface to an overall movement that seems to be a movement of general devouring of which life is the most pronounced form" (qtd. in Hollier 185). In the same way the master of the earth, man, devotes his whole existence to the conquest and voracious appropriation of whatever is not himself.

The System devotes itself to preventing any leaps, breaks, or somersaults. It must be in control of every rupture, sewing up any rips that would threaten the homogeneity of the world. But this is made possible only by homogenizing all material externality through a common abstract measurement, namely, standardization and bureaucratization. The System, having glazed the world over with the ideal and the identical, eliminates any difference that is not logical, or reduces it to a specific difference—a difference defined by the principle of the identity of the opposites. In other words, difference must be virtually eliminated or, at least, reduced and combined, not by the other logic, but by the logic of the other which has been assimilated by common sense and common usage. Therefore, the overthrow of ancien régime and the birth of the modern democratic state in the name of reason do not necessarily result in freedom, equality, and fraternity. Instead, we find in the modern state, of which the nightmarish world of Bartleby is a fine emblem, that reason loses its head when enlightenment spreads terror. Both in theory and in practice, reason constitutes itself in and through the act of exclusion that is maintained by prohibitions and taboos, which every reasonable person deems inviolable. In this way, prohibition functions as the condition of the possibility of reason. However, the System and its agents
such as the narrator in "Bartleby" resist recognizing the implications of reason's constitution. Inasmuch as reason rests upon prohibition, taboo itself cannot be rationally comprehended. Reason, in other words, presupposes nonreason. And, since reason is always secondary to something that is unreasonable, it can never be all-encompassing.

Bartleby resists the "carceral" textualization of the totalizing economic rationality. He refuses to be incorporated into the System by remaining "unworking," i.e., unproductive, and by saying "I would prefer not to." This latter statement deserves careful consideration separately. It is a polite, subjunctive statement; however, for Bartleby, it implies a very defiant resistance to any systematic assimilation. Grammatically speaking, to say "prefer" is to make choice between alternatives and is therefore an affirmation. As corollary, "prefer not to" is both a negation of affirmation and an affirmation of negation. In other words, it is an endless play of difference that resists any anchorage in the realm of sameness. Therefore, Bartleby's preferring not to work, to speak, and even not to live means at least two things. On the one hand, since to speak of preference is to imply the possibility and the freedom of making a choice, "to prefer not to" reveals that Bartleby is forced to make a choice in a world in which he is virtually deprived of the freedom to choose; therefore to say "prefer to" is to disclose the essential absurdity of the inhuman world in which he is situated. On the other hand, "prefer not to" implies that Bartleby is a heterogeneous element, a radical other that cannot be eliminated or recycled by the capitalist system. Like the letters that on "errands of life" "speed to death" (45), "prefer not to" is a defunct phrase, a moribund signifier resisting any reunion with an always already absent signified, or it is even a rupture that disrupts and renders functionless the signifying chain as a whole (or, as a hole).

As a result of his resistance, Bartleby is consigned to prison, where, by refusing to eat, he ends his life in total despair. But why does he refuse to eat? To refuse to eat is to resist and to disrupt the operation of the politico-economical
power that tries to inscribe itself on the human body via the human soul. In the capitalist society, nutrition, exercise, hygiene, body shapeup and even cholesterol-free food have all become parts of the micro-physics of power that help maintain the smooth operation of the global economy. Consequently, Bartleby’s hunger strike is a defiant and desperate gesture of resistance to the politicization of the body as *body politic*. But does Bartleby succeed in his attempt? In other words, does he remain, even after his death, a human waste product without being homogenized and exploited by the political economy of signs? To answer these questions, I will make a detour to a reading of the seal of the American one-dollar bill. As both the Great Seal and “Bartleby” have the eye and the pyramid as their central images, it may be justifiable to make an analogy between them.

According to Mark C. Taylor, capitalism can be understood as an “ontotheological political economy” whose guiding principle is the “fundamentalist” belief in the fundamentals named identity and unity (256). Taylor writes,

> The God in whom ontotheology trusts is ONE. This oneness is the principle that founds the united state(s). The ideal of the capitalist economy is printed on the scroll held in the beak of an eagle: *E Pluribus Unum*, From Many, One. A representation of the eagle, whose imperial name recalls the “strange name” of the philosopher par excellence [Hegel], is on the topside The Great Seal. (256)

In the left side of the seal, a beheaded pyramid appears. According to *Journals of the Continental Congress*,

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2 The following discussion of the American one-dollar bill is largely based on and developed from Mark C. Taylor’s remarkable commentary on the Great Seal in *Altarity* 256-60.
The pyramid signifies strength and duration. The eye over it and the motto allude to the many signal interpositions of providence in favour of the American cause. The date underneath in that of the Declaration of Independence, and the words under it signify the beginning of the new American Era, which commences from that date. (339-40; qtd. in Taylor 257)

Above the decapitated pyramid there is an eye in a triangle that radiates sunlight. The semicircular legends read: “He has favored our undertakings,” and “A new order of the ages.” The eye is God's eye; the image of the eye within a triangle surrounded by rays of the sun is a common symbol for the all-seeing, pan-optical, penal, phallic, eagle eye of God.

God's eye is always the right eye. It is, however, unclear whether the eye in the dollar bill is the right eye. According to Taylor, it is possible that William Barton, the designer of the seal, borrowed the triangulated eye from the apron of the Freemasons (257). George Washington, whose image adorns the face of the dollar, was a Mason. He is often pictured standing erect with a Masonic apron veiling his generative organ. In a well-known etching (“Washington as a Mason” by George Edward Ferine), the first president wears an apron. Almost every apron designs an eye in the midst of a triangle, which is inserted between two erect columns. (Taylor 257) The Masonic eye is usually the left eye. While the right eye is a traditional symbol of the sun, day, and the future, the left eye is a common symbol of the moon, night, and the past. In view of the pyramid under the eye, it is noteworthy that Egyptian god of the moon is Thoth, the nocturnal representative of Ra (Taylor 258). Derrida explains,

The figure of Thoth is opposed to its other (father, sun, life, speech, origin or orient, etc.), but as that which at once supplements and supplants it. Thoth extends or opposes by repeating or replacing.
By the same token, the figure of Thoth takes shape and takes its shape from the very thing it resists and it substitutes for. But it thereby opposes itself, passes into its other, and this messenger-god is truly a god of the absolute passage between opposites. . . . In distinguishing himself from his opposite, Thoth also imitates it, becomes its sign and representative, obeys it and conforms to it, replaces it, by violence if need be. He is thus the father’s other, the father, and the subversive movement of replacement. The god of writing is thus at once his father, his son, and himself. He cannot be assigned a fixed spot in the play of differences. Sly, slippery, and masked, an intriguer and a card, like Hermes, he is neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of joker, a floating signifier, a wild card, one who puts play into play. (Dissemination 92-93; also qtd. in Taylor 258)

As Thoth is the subversive repetition of Ra, the left eye is that of the right eye. However, this repetition is not to be understood in the sense of the recollection of Hegel’s re-membering but in the sense of Nietzsche’s eternal re-turning. Hegelian re-membering is grounded in a solid archetypal model or paradigm (i.e., the Absolute Spirit) which is untouched by the effects of repetition and which realizes and objectifies itself in its repetition. On the other hand, Nietzschean mode of repetition posits a world based on difference and dissemination. Each thing is unique, intrinsically different from every other thing. Similarity arises against the background of disparity. It is not, as Hegelian repetition is, a world of copies, but that of simulacra or phantasms.3 In the Great Seal, the Nietzschean repetition of the right eye by the left eye produces something that is

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3 See also J. Hillis Miller’s discussion of Platonic repetition and Nietzschean repetition in Fiction and Repetition 5-6. These two terms are used by Gilles Deleuze in The Logic of Sense.
neither the left eye nor the right eye: what it produces is something in between both eyes. Or, we may say this something in between is the pineal eye that fascinates Bataille so much. The pineal eye is not an organ but a fantasy or a myth. The fantasy is, in a certain manner, the discrete and essential component of all scatology to the extent that it escapes the economy of the totalizing and tantalizing idea. For if the idea is the model of copies resembling it, the phantasm on the contrary is neither a model nor a copy: it is an image with no resemblance (Hollier 121; Bataille, Visions 82ff). In short, the pineal eye is the heterogeneous element that cannot be regulated and assimilated by the political economy of the sign. It is a waste, or if you allow, shit that cannot be recycled by the speculative system, be it philosophical or economic system. Therefore, the eye, inscribed on the foundation of the capitalist economy, is also the eye that signals the decapitation and de-capitalization of the whole system—a system inscribed in and by the what Derrida calls the “economy of death,” a “non-conceptual” concept we will discuss later.

In some culture, a pyramid with the tip knocked off serves as a sacrificial altar: like the pyramid altars of sacrifice of the Aztecs and Mayans that obsess Bataille so much, or the pyramid atop the obelisk in Place de la Concorde where the sacrificial scaffold was constructed. In an essay entitled “The Obelisk,” Bataille approaches Hegel’s speculative philosophy by way of a consideration of the obelisk, topped by a pyramid, in the Place de la Concorde. According to Bataille, the obelisk “is without a doubt the purest image of the head and the heavens.” Recalling a “petrified sunbeam,” the firmly fixed obelisk is the “Egyptian image of the IMPERISHABLE.” As such, it “is the surest and most durable obstacle to the drifting away of things” (Vision 215). Thus speculative philosophy may be compared to an obelisk, as Hegelian re-collection purports to take perishable temporal and spatial existence up into the eternal life of the concept. Bataille explains some of the implications of such an untimely resurrection:
Even Hegel describing the movement of Spirit as if it excluded all possible rest made it end, however, at HIMSELF as if he were its necessary conclusion. Thus he gave the movement of time the centripetal structure that characterizes sovereignty, Being, or God. Time, on the other hand, dissolving each center that has formed, is fatally known as centrifugal—since it is known in a being whose center is already there. The dialectical idea, then, is only a hybrid of time and its opposite, of the death of God and the position of the immutable. But it nevertheless marks the movement of a thought eager to destroy what refuses to die, eager to break the bonds of time as much as to break the law through which God obligates. It is manifestly clear that the liberty of time traverses the heavy Hegelian process, precisely to the feeble extent that Socratic irony introduced into this world an eternal Being imposing man. (Vision 219)

While the obelisk is “the image of the imperishable,” the pyramid is a constant reminder of the ceaseless flow of time and the unavoidable death. The polarity of the obelisk and pyramid embodies the difference between eternity and time. For Bataille, this difference can be understood in terms of the difference between recollection of Hegel’s eternal re-membering and the repetition of Nietzsche’s eternal re-turning. Over against the obelisk of speculative philosophy, Bataille sets “the Pyramid of Suleri,” i.e., the “pyramidal rock or stone” along the lake of Silvaplana which precipitated Nietzsche’s ecstatic vision of the eternal return (Homo 295). Bataille maintains that the difference between Hegel and Nietzsche is a matter of time (Visions 219-220). A decapitated, or a de-capitalizing pyramid at times appears to be something like an A. Derrida suggests that the A figure in the pyramid can be read as the A of différence:

It is offered by a mute mark, by a tacit monument, I would even say
by a pyramid, thinking not only of the form of the letter when it is printed as a capital, but also of the text in Hegel's *Encyclopedia* in which the body of the sign is compared to the Egyptian Pyramid. The *a* of *diﬀérance*, thus, is not heard; it remains silent, secret and discreet as a tomb: *oikesis*. And thereby let us anticipate the delineation of a site, the familial residence of the tomb proper in which is produced, by *diﬀérance*, the economy of death. This stone—provided that one knows how to decipher its inscription—is not far from announcing the death of the tyrant. (Margins 4)

The English translator notes: "'Tomb' in Greek is *oikesis*, which is akin to the Greek *oikos*—house—from which the word 'economy' derives (*oikos*—house and *nemein*—to manage). Thus Derrida speaks of the 'economy of death' as the 'familial residence and tomb of the proper'" (Margins 4). Economy then means the management of a house, the art or science of managing a house or even the house of death. Such management is primarily concerned with expenses or, more precisely, with controlling expenditure.

When the pyramid serves as an altar, it remains a tomb—an empty tomb that marks the inescapability of death rather than the resurrection of life. Like the eye in the middle of the triangle, the decapitated, de-capitalizing pyramid marks the diacritical play of difference and identity that is both the working and the undoing of the ontotheology of the capitalist system. Bearing in mind the pyramid and the pineal eye, we may now resume our discussion of the end of Bartleby's life in the prison cell, and try to explain how his death as a sign is incorporated into the capitalist economy of death and how this economy is in turn inscribed by the textuality of difference that gives it identity but at the same time threatens to subvert the unity and identity on which this economy as a whole is built.

Near the end of the story, the narrator pays his last visit to the jail where
Bartleby is imprisoned. He describes:

The yard was entirely quiet. It was not accessible to the common prisoners. The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them. The *Egyptian character of the masonry* weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the *eternal pyramids*, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by the birds, had sprung.

Strangely huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up, and lying on his side, his head touching the cold stones, I saw the wasted Bartleby. But nothing stirred. I paused; then went. Close up to him; stooped over, and saw that his *dim eyes* were open; otherwise he seemed profoundly sleeping. (44-45; emphases added)

This quoted passage is impregnated with hackneyed symbolism. The shape of Bartleby’s body lying on its side with knees drawn up implies that he has returned to the womb and waits there to be reborn. Womb and tomb, respectively representing life and death, are two terms of binary opposition exploited by the economy of death. The soft turf imprisoned in the eternal pyramids obviously bears on the theme of redemption through suffering. And, as the narrator’s remarks that Bartleby is asleep “with kings and counselors” (a quotation from *Job*) indicate, even though his life is marked by irrational and unproductive expenditure, his death is now appropriated and regulated by the capitalist economy of death.

The whole process of redemption is in accordance with the “economic” doctrine of the trinity developed by Christian theology. The “economic trinity,”
for which the triangular sides of the pyramid\(^4\) would be an apt metaphor, refers to the way in which God deals with the world and his people. It depicts different stages in the process of salvation. According to Taylor, “the economic relationship of the Father and Son in and through the Spirit is all-encompassing. Nothing is left out. When Son returns to Father in Spirit, the fall is overcome and no remains are left in the tomb. The resurrection of the Son is the ultimate return on the Father’s investment” (32). The return of Bartleby to the womb (or the tomb) follows the same logic that governs the economic trinity. However, the image of Bartleby’s gazing eye, which uncannily repeats the narrator’s “astonished eye,” reminds us of the pineal eye. The eye is ascending to the tip of the pyramid, transforming the providential eye of God into the pineal eye of Medusa, which is a decapitating eye. Thus begins the vertiginous play of difference within identity and of identity within difference that characterizes the capitalist political economy. Once a clerk in the Dead Letter Office, which, as a branch of American Post Office, may have a blind eagle as its emblem, Bartleby was a floating, unexchangeable, and therefore unproductive sign when he was living, but his death finds him a sign in the economy of death. He is finally forced, in Foucault’s words, “to emit a sign.” Therefore the final words in the story “Ah Bartleby! Ah Humanity!” (45) may well be read as “Ah Bartleby! Ah Inhumanity!”

\[^4\] When used as verb, “pyramid” means “to speculate in securities trading by using paper profit as margin for buying and selling.”

**Works Cited**


眼與金字塔：梅爾維爾
〈抄寫員巴托比〉中的死亡經濟

王俊三*

摘要

梅爾維爾在其短篇小說〈抄寫員巴托比〉中批判西方政經系統試圖建立同質性世界的努力。在紐約華爾街工作的巴托比所面對是一純然為絕對經濟理性所宰制的世界；這個世界兼併、挪用、並消化所有異質性的他者，而巴托比的存在暴露出既有宰制系統內部的不足與盲點。在本文中所有的抄寫員皆身處在禁閉的空間裏、並在敘述者的凝視下辛勤工作，以符合經濟理性的生產、分配與獎懲原則；他們的身體被投資在政經符號的場域中，因爲權力關係直接控制、標定、訓練他們、逼迫他們在交換系統中不斷被轉換成符號，並製造符號。後啟蒙西方世界的工作倫理是建立在利己的概念上：馬克思主義或古典政治經濟學、俗化的基督教道德觀或功利主義的倫理學皆視個人為據有強烈利己傾向、可以被組織的個體；然而怪異的巴托比卻拒絕工作，因此他的存在被視為對主流倫理觀念與經濟理性的挑戰。透過巴托比注定失敗的努力與悖離常理的行逕，本文暴露出貌似良善的工作倫理壓制的本質與其對人性的扭曲，並同時呈現出人類追求絕對自由的不可能性與荒謬性。

關鍵字：建築、消費、凝視、金字塔、死亡、經濟

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