Of Figures and Letters, or the Impossible Accounting of Bartleby

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Undeniably, 19th-century American literature scholars have displayed a renewed interest in the formal features of literature (Weinstein and Looby, 2012), and Melville scholars have also focused on the stylistic features of his works. Among others, Samuel Otter’s “Reading Moby-Dick” (2014) points to the essential role of form in the novel, and in “Melville’s Style” (2019) he emphasizes the importance of vision, delving into the texture of Melville’s lines to bring out the crucial role of the varied gaps which disrupt the narrator’s lines of sight and lead to a necessary leap from disrupted topography to fractured typography. In “Douglass’s and Melville’s ‘Alphabets of the Blind’” (2008), Hester Blum analyzes the dashes scattered in “The Encantadas” as a way of expressing and inserting an unseemly, “unspeakable” violence (mainly sexual) into the text, dashes functioning as the typographic signs of a “broader textual crisis” meant to represent rape, and Marcy Dinius closely looks at the use of the triple asterisks.

Melville’s most famous tale, “Bartleby the Scrivener,” and his famous “I would prefer not to” have proved a fascinating focus of attention in Melville studies, thereby giving rise to a rich network of literary and philosophical interpretations. As Branka Arsić writes in the penetrating analyses of Bartleby, Passive Constitution, “if it is almost impossible to determine anything about [Bartleby], if he is forever lost, it is because the concepts of our familiar knowledge cannot comprehend him” (Arsić 10). From the outset, Arsić pinpoints one of the most problematic issues raised in the tale: it is impossible to “comprehend” Bartleby (from com – prehendere, i.e. to find adequate ways to completely grasp him, catch hold of him, so as to get the full measure of the notoriously measured, abstemious scrivener). If comprehension may be achieved through textual measures or measurements, the purpose of such measuring should be to circumscribe, then contain an object, or a subject, to transpose it as accurately as possible onto the written page: in other words, to figure it.
Among the many meanings that the term “figure” may encompass, thus conferring unquestionable richness on Melville’s scribe, this essay will use the following entries for this word in *Webster’s Dictionary*:

1. to represent by or as if by a figure or outline", before turning to more abstract, arithmetical / mathematical sense of “figure” and “to figure” in terms of arithmetics and calculation.
2. to indicate or represent by numerals
3. calculate

Starting from the usual sense of “figure” as the bodily shape or form of a person (*Webster’s Dictionary*), I will consider the several attempts at grasping Bartleby’s “figure” by means of mathematical or logical, discursive systems of representation, which fail and lead to consider the scrivener as an occurrence of what Jean-François Lyotard terms “figural.” His theory links the figural to vision, and contrasts it with discourse and therefore the written text. As it is connected to vision, the figural cannot be rationalized or integrated within the discursive system, and can also be regarded as a disruptive force which resists any systemic or linguistic approach to language. However, as Olivier Schefer explains in his study of the figural, with the figure something is to be seen and understood that cannot be said but only shown. Yet the figural cannot be reduced to the mere status of some non-fiction, or non-mimetic figure: the figural is rather an expression of a reality in excess, overflowing on the discursive and disrupting the intelligible order (Schefer 916).

It therefore may prove particularly difficult, not to say impossible, to grasp a figure such as Bartleby, who seems to elude any system of measurement, any type of accounting. Of course, an impressive array of illuminating analyses, displaying various approaches to the issue, have broached the crucial subject of the unaccountable scrivener. But while the much-commented on encounter with Melville’s mysterious scribe has often been studied from a purely ethical perspective, it appears that Melville’s short fiction heavily relies on a significant number of attempts to “measure” or to “fathom” what the narrator himself calls “the unaccountable Bartleby” (Melville 1987, 37). Unaccountable, that is, ethically not responsible, but also inexplicable, non-accountable: he is “that figure” (19) standing on the threshold of the Lawyer’s office, a character who eventually escapes any type of financial, arithmetical or narrative account.

The aim of this essay is to study what stands out as an essential feature of Bartleby from a writerly, typographical angle. How can the inscrutable, forever exterior figure of the silent scribe be accounted for and featured in language, more specifically in the narrator’s discourse? If we accept the lawyer’s inaugural statement assessing Bartleby as “an irreparable loss to literature” (13), then how can the former Master in Chancery turn into the “author” of a “little narrative” whose goal aims at introducing, then reporting, the story and truth of Bartleby’s “Humanity”?

The question of authorship and authorial power emerges as an interesting aspect in the tale, especially through the use of punctuation, a question that Melville himself had raised in his 1856 letter to Dix and Edwards. Daniel Couch contends that the writer “abdicates responsibility” (Couch 176) for punctuation in his letter to his editors. For Couch, the rejection of what should stand as his authorial power and the lawyer’s use of punctuation which reflects the influence of the scribe on his narration actually highlight the absence of any well-defined agency (Couch 176-177). This analysis is based
on the silences of Bartleby, i.e. the oral dimension of punctuation; but punctuation comprises two dimensions, an oral and a written one—therefore visual and typographical. Couch focuses on the white spaces interspersed in the narrator’s tale as a striking means to convey the scribe’s overwhelming yet structuring silences: Bartleby’s “white” punctuation spreads and culminates in the final and irrevocable silence of the scribe at the end of the story. But focusing on the black type of punctuation and typography in the tale underscores the importance of the visibility of the marks on the page, which allows the emergence of a figural dimension in the text (according to Lyotard). The black punctuation in Melville’s text calls attention to the spatial rather than the oral. But the discursive is interwoven with the figural, which can be accessed only from within language; embedded in it, it points to another dimension which proves incommensurable with discourse. The conspicuous comma of the original title as it was published in Putnam’s Magazine, “Bartleby, The Scrivener” divides the two words and materializes the heterogeneity of the two spaces: “Bartleby,” the figure, and “The Scrivener,” the discursive, while it also introduces the figure into the texture of discourse. I will first consider the narrator’s multiple efforts to measure and account for the scrivener and his essential exteriority in the tale, starting with an analysis of the use of typography and punctuation (such as italics, inverted commas, dashes) related to Bartleby’s apparitions in the text. The use and command of punctuation, generally considered to be the prerogative of the author, could logically be attributed to the narrator who intends to establish his power and authority on his narrative in the same way that he wishes to control his lists, his employees and his world.

These textual marks may therefore be read as the many attempts of a supposedly masterful narrator to produce an authoritative report and account which encompasses the entirety of his staff and office, including a character who gradually emerges as definitely unfathomable. But from the beginning, Bartleby proves to be a challenge for the Lawyer who strives to find an adequate “measure” (in literature, law, or accountancy) that could allow him to grasp and reduce a “figure” whose irreducible alterity to material measures and signs unfolds along the pages. Between the ethical hosting of the scribe’s pale and enigmatic face and the literary “advent of Bartleby,” I will broach the question of the ungraspable status of the mysterious figure in this article. In such a fictional context where every element revolves around the “figure” and the narrator’s attempt at figuring it, the suitability of law and accountancy to provide adequate tools to render and ultimately harness the figure will be analyzed. But as it will quickly appear, words and counts prove inappropriate, as conventional syntax and typography, and more generally language, fail to actually take hold of Bartleby: the figure of Melville’s scrivener cannot be comprehended by the closed system of discourse including punctuation and typography, while Bartleby’s “passive resistance” reveals its figural nature and points to his irrecoverable otherness, that discourse cannot account for.

Law and Accountancy: Of Measures and Figures

The original title of Melville’s story, as it first appeared in the November and December 1853 issues of Putnam’s Magazine, was “Bartleby, The Scrivener. A Story of Wall-Street.” But interestingly, the title was shortened to its simplest, and perhaps, strongest,
expression, and became “Bartleby” in the 1856 collection _The Piazza Tales_. In Ishmael’s words, “surely all this is not without meaning,” and this change in the story’s title clearly implies that the main focus of interest, and therefore, central figure of the text, should be a certain Bartleby. Yet the tale does not immediately introduce the eponymous character, and focuses instead on a seemingly “masterly” narrator, who also happens to be a lawyer and, incidentally, the biographer of “a somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been written—I mean the law-copyists or scriveners” (13); given this remark, the case of Bartleby undeniably stands out as an exception. Hence the paradox of the situation: how can the lawyer, who also proves to be keen on business and accountancy, manage to report and render the story, if not the truth, of an enigmatic, pallid scribe, “of whom nothing is ascertainable […] except, indeed, one vague report”? (Ibid.). This report happens to be recounted, as if postponed and literally rejected at the end of the story (45), in a terse prequel lying beyond, or outside the typographical dividing line of asterisks which concludes the main narrative.

The lawyer’s enterprise is therefore more than challenging, as he himself admits to his lack of appropriate means to catch the truth of the pale scrivener’s ever-escaping presence: “I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man.” (Ibid.) However, he first tries to apply the methods generally used in his office: “Imprimis.” To begin with, the lawyer (who more often resorts to accountancy and figures) starts listing his belongings, his “employés” (sic, 13) in a meticulous inventory as if to affirm his strong hold, as Master and owner, of the premises and even of the staff. In such a context, where the logic of property law and ownership rights reign supreme and constitute a major operating principle, the narrator will logically employ a similar operating system: keen on acquiring property, the “conveyancer and title hunter” (19) equates ownership with Mastery and authorship. Thus, while listing the various items of his Chambers, he simultaneously names them, as if performatively possessing and owning them, imparting to them a linguistic, economic and legal existence.

Such a methodically drawn catalogue is meant to order his world while establishing himself as a legitimate source of authority and of power: as a man of experience, his profession leads him to juggle figures and characters, scriptures and digits on hundreds of pages “written in a crimpy hand” (20) he proofreads and checks before certifying their accuracy and legal authority.

Unsurprisingly this accuracy requirement also applies to the lawyer’s methodical listing and initial description as the latter persistently resorts to calculations and measurements, such as geometric shapes and figures (the “square cisterns” 14), “interval” (both in space and time), “lines” (36), or the figurative “circle of [his] professional acquaintance” (38). In his attempt to encompass, hold and control his small world, he even comes to express time in spatial terms with recurring references to the meridian centered, dial-shaped motif that underlies the text, thus blending time and space around the twelve hours of the clock (“twelve o’clock, meridian” 15). Actually, a rule of “twelve” seems to operate as a structuring principle in the lawyer’s logically written organization and accounts, with its multiples: “twenty four hours” (Ibid.), Turkey’s age “sixty years old” (Ibid.) and divisors (“six days,” “six inches” or “six […] for a penny—”). The lawyer’s world is obviously governed by arithmetics and figures, a field in which the former Master in Chancery excels as he openly admits that
he “had counted upon a life-lease of the profits” generated by this “very pleasantly remunerative” office (14). Much emphasis is indeed given to accountancy in the initial presentation of the Wall Street office, ruled by geometry, calculation, profits and losses, assets and liabilities, property rights and title deeds. Moreover, the Lawyer makes it a point of honor to underline “method” (Ibid.), his second best “personal quality” after “prudence,” as he starts unfolding a very methodical introduction based on a thorough description of his neatly organized world. However, it soon becomes clear that the lawyer’s usual accounting method and calculation skills cannot lead to any satisfactory representation of the strange scrivener in his tale, already suggesting that Bartleby may well be introducing an element of incommensurability in discourse.

Melville’s text is scattered with figures: first in the form of numbers used to measure and render the setting and characters, but such figures obviously fail to provide any help when the narrator comes to figure one “singular” element, another eminently ambivalent “figure,” “incurably forlorn” (19), “an irreparable loss to literature” (13).

**Figuring the Figure?**

Bartleby’s first appearance in the lawyer’s working place and textual space occurs as a purely visual allusion to the scribe’s pale “figure,” or shape: a singular “figure,” standing on the threshold of the neatly delineated office of the lawyer.

The crucial term, “a figure,” is introduced here in the first pages of the text, just after the “indispensable” description of the general surroundings deemed to be necessary to an “adequate understanding” of “the chief character about to be presented” (13). From the obvious pun about the writerly nature of the scribe (to be inscribed and printed on the page), to the mention of a “figure” a few pages after, the scrivener’s status has clearly shifted, turning the “thin and pale” (28) printed character into a “bodily shape or form, especially of a person a slender figure” (Webster’s Dictionary). A corporeal presence in the text, the strange character clearly stands here as essentially visible, a quality which can affect both discourse and image. First apprehended as an observable shape, the figure also operates in the order of the legible, like the printed characters delineating the slender figure of the protagonist on the page: “that figure” is almost immediately identified or rather, perceived, but also made visible on the page through the written shape of his name: “It was Bartleby.” (19) Bartleby the figure first remains silent and speechless for some time—or some lines—in the text, until he utters the iconic “formula” which literally sums up the whole protagonist: “I would prefer not to.” From visibility to legibility, from pure shape to written sign, the figure reaches the level of language and speech, even though the usual, normative syntactic or grammatical rules prove to be irrelevant to his case. The a-grammaticality of the formula has already given rise to an impressive number of analyses which generally focus on the gaps or silence associated with the scribe’s proverbial passivity.

However, Bartleby and his strange, non-grammatical and original formula, appear to elude this square, rigid and mathematical scheme. The “figure” even seems to run out of control, as the speech or scarce words he utters gradually contaminate the whole text and other characters: “So you have got the word too” (31), the narrator exclaims, as if Turkey had been literally infected by the famous word. Faced with the danger and threat of having all the protagonists’ tongues, then heads, turned by a “demented man” the lawyer feels the need to take measures, diegetically but also textually; as a narrator,
his aim will be to control and hold the presence of the weird character and keep the
figure within his lines. Yet this attempt is doomed to fail, as Bartleby’s formula clearly
reveals the fundamental inadequacy of normal, grammatical language to define him
and confine his presence within the textual space; the usual, normal indexing process
of language (in the Piercean sense of the term) fails to provide an adequate
understanding of the chief character. The usual, referentiality-based indexing
production of meaning in language is disrupted by the scribe’s formula; connecting the
clause to the world thanks to the indexical function presupposes, in Peirce’s semiotics,
the possibility of this relation. In the case of Bartleby’s words, the clause “I would
prefer not to” shows an incomplete indexation process (relation to the world) which
hinders any adequate interpretation. As the indexing process proves to be impossible
with the formula, the scribe himself cannot be part of a full denotation process nor
referential link to the world: “Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is
ascertainable” (13).

Furthermore, the lawyer asserts from the outset, as an incipit, the firm belief that “no
materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss
to literature” (13), thus implying that the figure is bound to remain outside the
narrative and textual space. Consequently, how can the overwhelming presence of the
pale scribe be accounted for in the text? How can any written measurement give a
satisfactory outline or insight that could convey the full and exact measure of the
peculiar nature of Bartleby? It appears that he slips through the net of language, and
disrupts the discursive and representational system; the scribe and his non-indexical
formula may just point to a non-discursive space and introduce figurality into the tale.

**Punctuation—Typographic Cornering**

Since words and counts prove inadequate to render the strange presence of Bartleby,
there remains, between the character and the words, the syntax and punctuation. A
particular attention to the use of commas, dashes, and double punctuation marks as
well as italics will prove helpful. Interestingly, Melville expressed his concern for
punctuation in a letter to his publisher, after he had noticed significant differences
between the 1853 version of *Bartleby*, and the one published in *The Piazza Tales*. When
reviewing the proof copies for *The Piazza Tales* in preparation for its publication,
Melville wrote to his editors Dix and Edwards, in a letter dated 19 January 1856, that
“[a]side from ordinary corrections, some few other improvements have been made [to
the tales], and a desirable note or two added.” But about two months later, on 24 March
1856, he wrote to them saying that “[t]here seems to have been a surprising profusion
of commas in these proofs. I have struck them out pretty much; but hope that some one
who understands punctuation better than I do, will give the final hand to it” (Melville
1993, 284).

In Melville’s days, punctuation rules were not clearly defined yet (Watson), but even
though the writer only mentions the “profusion of commas” in his letter, this remark
raises the issue of the responsibility for punctuation in the tale, and consequently, that
of authority. Even with most inconspicuous marks such as the comma, the use of
punctuation establishes a gesture of authority and the proliferation of punctuation
marks is significant as it can express either a rebellion against convention, or an
inability to alter the structure of language. In “Bartleby,” this question emerges as
relevant but unfortunately, the editors of the Northwestern-Newberry edition of *The Piazza Tales* mention the impossibility to accurately determine the punctuation of *Putnam's Magazine*. However, this issue is worth mentioning since the punctuation may be ascribed to three entities: the narrator of course, Herman Melville himself, or even the publisher. Graham Thompson’s *Herman Melville. Among the Magazines* explores the complex interactions between Melville’s magazine fictions and the influence of editorial policies on the form of his writing, its “magazinish dimension” as Thompson terms it (2013, 109) and shows how it even becomes part of Melville’s creative process. Well aware that Bartleby (the figure) escapes discourse and resists linguistic logic, Melville uses punctuation marks as a tool to visually insert the presence of the scribe into the signifying network of his text, thus asserting authorial agency in spite of what might be read as an apparent “abdication” of responsibility for punctuation (Couch 176); conversely, the lawyer (whose narration rests on laws and rules, and more generally on accepted norms of grammar and language) admits to a serious weakening of his authority subsequent to his “contact with the scrivener” (31).

As Daniel Couch notes, the text is scattered with irregular punctuation marks, such as dashes, semi-colons, commas, colons creating wordless spaces, which “generates a place where Bartleby’s presence can be implicitly felt” (Couch 169). However, speechless as it may be, the pale figure of the scribe—now materialized in the black characters of the printed page—can visually appear in the silent lines of the text. The narrator repeatedly refers to Bartleby’s pallid appearance, which tends to suggest that visual perception is the only way to grasp the character, a blank figure whose meaningless yet pervading words remain beyond the lawyer’s comprehension and typographic control. After the first encounter with the protagonist, the narrator almost systematically avoids the conventional use of double commas (for lists or dialogue) in the subsequent narrative; as the former’s difficulties to understand the significance of Bartleby’s behavior increase (Couch 177), the use of strong punctuation marks (mainly dashes) significantly and symmetrically multiply as if echoing the scribe’s multiple repetitions of his strange formula.

Finally, I resolved upon this;—I would put certain calm questions to him the next morning. (29)

In vain:—I was the last person known to have anything to do with him. (40)

In these examples, the dash is preceded by another punctuation mark such as a comma or a semi-colon (conventionally used by the narrator to control his lists), thus paradoxically combining coordination, logical continuity in the different parts of a sentence with the visual interruption of the dash.

As the narration unfolds, interspersed with double commas and dashes, Bartleby’s formula starts proliferating, quoted between inverted commas; after its first occurrence—“Bartleby in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, ‘I would prefer not to’” (20)—the persistent repetition of the same expression, with an occasional variation (“I prefer not to,” “I prefer not,” 25) literally invades the text and punctuates it at the same time. The typographical sign is normally used to indicate a faithful reproduction of words as they were initially spoken by another speaker. But the inverted commas also signal that the speech they enclose comes from another origin, thus introducing distance between the language they quote and the written text, and drawing the reader’s attention to the words cited. In using these punctuation marks, the narrator certainly aims to reproduce the exact words of the formula as Bartleby pronounced them and also tries to keep them under his control, but he ends up repeating himself.
one variation of the formula: “‘Prefer not to,’ echoed I” (20), later comically echoed by one of his employees (“‘Prefer not, eh?’ gritted Nippers—” 31). In these examples, instead of accurately reproducing the words spoken by the scribe, the narrator quotes between inverted commas his own repetition of the original speech, as well as his clerk’s voice quoting the original formula and adds italics in the typography. The inverted commas then enclose only duplications, which conflict with the accuracy implied by quotation marks: unmediated, objective reproduction fails, the original formula remains at a distance outside the narrator’s quotation marks which eventually come to symbolize this failure.

23 Just as he had managed to hold and keep his other copyists in the strictly and geometrically ordered space of his office, the narrator tries to confine his newly hired employee in a carefully chosen place, and “to assign Bartleby a corner by the folding-doors” (19). Literally boxing him into a “corner” in his space, but also holding him between the typographical hooks of the inverted commas, he also tries to corner him between the angles of the punctuation marks.

24 Quite comically, in the introductory listing of his premises and staff the lawyer had already made a similar use of such angles and corners when he humorously described his copyists. But the “countenance” of “pursy” Turkey with his awkward and noisy outbursts could easily be held and rendered between the double dashes of the narrative: “His countenance became intolerably fervid, […]—gesticulating with a long ruler at the other end of the room—” (16). In this simple, easy example, the dashes can visually frame a non-problematic content or figure, in this case a familiar, usually harmless copyist who always grows restless at that time of the day since he is governed by the rule of the meridian.

25 The same typographical cornering attempt occurs, albeit reversed, with the second scribe Nippers, whose “fits” are “mainly observable in the morning” (18), before noon. But as the lawyer strives to write down the second employee in his inventory, the latter obstinately refuses to enter the space provided by the Master: “Nippers could never get [his] table to suit him.” (16) As the lines and columns of accountancy cannot “suit him,” he logically proves unable to fit in “a scrivener’s table,” that is in the right, “sharp angles” of his desk, and also of quotation marks.

26 However, even when the conventional rules of punctuation are applied, dashes and commas introduce a visible disruption which breaks the law and order of the narrator’s small office world. The lawyer’s attempt to assign, and in a way, to trap Bartleby in an “interval” of his Chambers may as well be regarded as a maladroit handling, or writing, of alterity: in his irreducible exteriority, “that” figure remains out of reach and introduces at the same time an interior distance within the very textual configuration carefully measured and divided by the lawyer. The “high green folding screen” is supposed to allow a proximity of both the narrator and the scrivener in the same partitioned space. But the lawyer rapidly loses sight and control of the figure, in his office and in his discourse.

27 After the lawyer’s failure to literally “corner” the figure of Bartleby in a dark angle of his office, no wonder then that the docile scrivener should stay put before he utters his first occurrence of the famous formula. From that moment on, Bartleby’s words will rapidly come down to the mere expression of his formula (with a few variations), until finally remaining silent. But the number, and frequency of dashes and commas increase as Bartleby’s unseemly behavior and incongruous formula multiply throughout the
text, as if the lawyer, now aware of the inadequacy of fixed syntactic punctuation rules, eventually attempted to isolate the scribe and bar him between dashes, with an additional use of italics: “One prime thing was this,—he was always there;—” (26).

While the “one prime thing” discreetly echoes the “Imprimis” of the incipit, it also sends the reader and observer back to the very first appearance, one should even say apparition, of the pallid figure of the scribe, a visible figure whose identity, or rather, “identification” is disclosed and rejected at the end of the paragraph, after the narrator’s emotional exclamation: “It was Bartleby.” (19) With no double punctuation. In this quotation, the neutral “it” has turned into a personal pronoun, and there stands the unaccountable figure, framed, and perhaps even tentatively confined between the horizontal bars of the typography. This common and simple existential clause only asserts the “existence” of the scribe, and points to the distance with the narrator, as the shifter “there” makes it clear.

The simple presence of the figure cannot be satisfactorily inserted between conventional punctuation marks, and disrupts the typographic and syntactic line of the lawyer’s remark; pointing to Bartleby’s enduring presence, the italicized segment referring to the scribe is framed between two m-dashes and a semi-colon, and it may be interesting to notice that the lawyer uses “there” instead of “here.”

The disconnection generated by the punctuation marks, added to the unexpected “always” (with a slight alteration of grammar and tense), appears to open a gap, a space carved in the narrator’s discourse supposed to accommodate the unaccountable figure: Bartleby actually “[is] always there,” he occurs in language, as well as in his formula, opening onto what lies outside language. Another space, another scene, evoked in the concluding paragraph of the story, itself incidentally rejected beyond the typographic line of asterisks, out of the well-ordered, normative world of the main narration. Through the allusion to the “little item of rumor” which swells and becomes a “vague report” (45), the connection between Bartleby and the “Dead Letters” finally emerges: “Dead Letters! Does it not sound like dead men?” (Ibid.)

In the concluding lines of the tale, framed by the use of a double punctuation (between exclamation and question marks) looms a visible figuration of what is non-figurable and lost forever. In that space, dead letters are “like dead men”: here the scribe has turned into a dead letter, and as such the figure of the scribe cannot be kept in any “interval” or “period” (spatial heterogeneity) of time, or space of any type (the bars of a “sentence” or a prison). The only possible place where he can stay is his “hermitage” secluded in the distance of an interior space and language paradoxically situated inside the “abode” of the narrator and at the same time forever outside, “yonder” in an irreducible exteriority: “Yonder he lies—sleeping in the yard there.” (44)

As the narrator makes it clear Bartleby remains “unaccountably eccentric” (42); his insistent allusions to the scribe’s “eccentricities” highlight one essential feature of the scrivener, whose pale form remains on the edges of the lawyer’s tale. The visual reference to the figure links textuality and vision, which can occur only at the periphery of discourse; Bartleby cannot insert himself into the spatial and representational system of the lawyer, his figure pointing to the incommensurable dimension of the figural which cannot be represented (in language).
Melville also resorts to another typographical device, i.e. italics, first as a conventional way of emphasizing the italicized word, which tends to enhance the importance of the visual, not to say the visibility of the italicized object: “I make some mention of myself, my employées, my business” (13); “Will you tell me any thing about yourself?” (30). Italics are normally used for emphasis and contrast, thus drawing the reader’s attention to specific parts of the text that the narrator deems essential (in that case, the need to gather basic information about the protagonist) while introducing into a foreign language a term which stands out both visually and aurally. The same device applies to the following example: “That’s the word, Turkey,” said I—“that’s it.” (31) Here the italics definitely highlight a verbal element as well as two co-referential words, thus adding even more emphasis on the italicized part, and making it visually relevant. The device is further used and expanded in other occurrences:

“Oh, prefer? oh yes—queer word. I never use it myself. (31)

“Prefer not, eh?” gritted Nippers— “I’d prefer him, if I were you, sir,” addressing me—“I’d prefer him; I’d give him preferences, the stubborn mule! What is it, sir, pray, that he prefers not to do now?” (31)

If “Dead letters are like dead men,” Bartleby himself is likened to a slanting character when the narrator evokes his “lean, reclining form” (27): from a “lean face” to a leaning “form,” the figure of Bartleby has turned into an italic which can leave a “faint impress” (ibid.) on the cushions of an old sofa.

Bartleby then becomes part of the “dead letters” which never reach their mark and carry their secret to the grave; he can logically be equated with the formula which punctuates the narrator’s tale but remains a mystery from end to end. It repeatedly appears in the main narrative between quotation marks and in italics in a number of occurrences. The word “prefer” is italicized when emphatically repeated and echoed by the other protagonists after Bartleby’s initial utterance of the word: “Oh, prefer? oh yes—queer word. I never use it myself,” Turkey exclaims (31). “Queer” is definitely an appropriate qualifier here, as it is linked to what is eccentric, or also “oblique, off-center.”

In their visually slant typography the italics seem to be leaning towards an outside, an exterior beyond the limited frame of the text; they could also be pointing to an “Other” whose presence is visibly suggested among the right, Roman characters of the text. After realizing the limitations of inverted commas, italics may then appear as another typographical means to render Bartleby’s eccentric presence and speech in the lawyer’s main narration. But, precisely because of their oblique and slanting typography, they depart from the right angles or neat corners of the quotation marks (Romanski 40).

As it is not always straight or square, the quotation does not always go where expected, and it finally escapes, even if “stationary”: Bartleby, however, “was always there” (26). Throughout the story Bartleby seems to remain forever outside, beyond the diegetic walls and limits of the lawyer’s chambers or final confinement in the “Tombs” but, paradoxically, nearly outside language itself. From that perspective, as a figure the scribe points to the order of the figural but the passage to the figural space can only be made within discourse. As a visible figure Bartleby occurs in language and writing. He takes place, remains there, as if temporarily stuck between the dashes of the text, standing in Melville’s fiction as a slanting phenomenon, “an object or aspect known
through the senses rather than by thought or intuition” (Webster’s Dictionary). Here he stays, couched in italics before literally lying down for eternal rest. Thanks to the italics the reader and narrator are thus granted access to the visible figure and character of the scribe.15

Bartleby remains a mystery to the end, speaking words nobody can understand, and finally immures himself in silence, before he is actually walled up by the law and the text. Melville’s character may emblemize the linguistic fracture of language, and feature the impassable bar between signified and signifier. This essential disjunction and subsequent disruption introduced into the fiction by means of the typography points to the existence of a space between, an interval where the limit between these two dimensions briefly meet (Berkman 131). As if forever suspended between “not” and “not to,” as if forever deferring any “yet to come” the figure of Bartleby signifies the jointing of the irreconcilable (Berkman 138), the gap between designation (index) and signification (meaning).

Although Melville’s proficiency in mathematics was “downright shaky” (Parker 2002, 533), in his writings he evinced a steady interest in the topic. Melville persistently turned to algebra, and algebraic signs (Turpin 28), including the famous reference to the “x” sign in Pierre,16 or the equally noted “empty cipher” image in Moby-Dick.17 The visual figure eventually functions as a cipher;18 not as a coded message but as a numerical digit, a non-entity, a zero or “nothing.” The number zero, with its round central and visual nothingness is nonetheless an indispensable logical and poetic operator, an empty cipher which haunts Melville’s fiction.19

Conclusion: Bartleby the Cipher

Bartleby remains outside: close to the lawyer, and yet in an irreducible, visual and ungraspable distance. Far from coming down to a simple summary of his enigmatic formula, he stands for a figure, or a figura, an empty cipher with no fixed meaning. “I would prefer not to”: the formula, suspended after the “to” figures the suspension of the protagonist: Bartleby stands in the discrepancy of the space opened by the disjunction of designation and signification. The scribe has then become a visible sign, a phenomenal manifestation that tries to conceal when it reveals: a visual sign and character, exposed, he takes place in language, in an infinite interval that no typography nor syntax may hold. Such a figure does not represent, it rather de-presents (Agamben 1995, 72). Suspended in his verbal formula, a figure of mere contingency and neutrality which expresses no will, he simply and purely advenes, and the narrator aptly mentions the “advent of Bartleby” (15). Which is literally what happens: Bartleby “advenes,” he takes place. With this advent, Bartleby the figure is exposed, while he keeps his mysteries and paradoxical opacity. More than the need for a hermeneutic type of activity or exegesis, the enigmatic figure points to visibility, which in turn points to legibility. As Lyotard declares: “the given is not a text, it possesses an inherent thickness, or rather a difference, which is not to be read, but rather seen” (Lyotard 3).

An “irreparable loss to literature,” Bartleby remains passive and suspended, a pure phenomenon which cannot be quoted, nor enclosed within punctuation or typography. He obviously cannot be satisfactorily held nor bracketed, let alone properly measured. In his passivity, he expresses a space which precisely escapes the grasp of the textual
and of the discursive order: an a-signifying figure pointing to an outside of language which nevertheless works on it from the inside: as the lawyer makes clear, “Bartleby was billeted upon [him] for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like [him] to fathom” (37).

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**NOTES**

2. See, for example, Derrida, **Donner la mort**, Deleuze, **Critique et clinique**, Rancière, **La Chair des mots**, Agamben, **Bartleby ou la création**, and Blanchot, **L’écriture du désastre**.
3. All quotations from “Bartleby, the Scrivener” are taken from the 1987 Northwestern-Newberry edition.
4. “Les écrivains créent leur propre ponctuation, partie prenante de leur style, en transgressant les règles du code.” (Serça 71)
5. In the original version published in **Putnam’s Monthly Magazine**, in November 1853, a slightly different spelling, “employées,” is used, still in French in the text.
6. The agrammaticality of Bartleby’s formula has been much debated topic, and even Deleuze seemed to question the appropriateness of the term he himself used (68). The formula cannot be considered as strictly “agrammatical” in terms of linguistic norms, yet the statement sounds unexpectedly mannered and disconcerting. However, the scrivener’s expression shows an inherent indefiniteness, which allows the employee to challenge the lawyer’s grammatical logic,
and more generally, authority, thus defying and disrupting the normative system of verbal representation.

7. For instance, in Agamben, *Bartleby ou la création*; Deleuze, “Bartleby ou la formule”; Rancière, *La Chair des mots*. This type of approaches, based on linguistics and phenomenology, has to be contrasted with another type of analyses, based on historicist or new historicist approaches.

8. I am referring here to Charles Sanders Peirce's symbol/index/icon triad which he introduced in his system of semiotics and logic. The symbol/index/icon triad focuses on the relations of signs to their objects: symbols have a convention-based relationship with their objects (e.g. alphanumeric symbols); indexes/indices are directly influenced by their objects (e.g. a weathervane or a thermometer); and icons have specific properties in common with their objects (e.g. portraits, diagrams) (Johansen 2002, 51). The symbol/index/icon triad also applies to all forms of communication. Language is obviously a symbolic sign-system, but for Pierce, the symbol only makes sense if it involves what he calls an index. Thanks to the index, therefore, the clause is linked to an object likely to exist, it is linked (more or less directly) to the world. The essence of the clause, Peirce explains, is to say something about its object. This is its usage, its interpretation. The linguistic clause, in short, is a sign which is interpreted as a fact. And as such, it cannot do without an index (whose task is to point to the object of the world which determines the representation).

9. The “contemporary house styling of the newspapers and periodicals to which he contributed [is not] consistent enough to be helpful in determining precisely what elements of the punctuation of his contributions resulted from it.” (“General Note on the Text,” Melville, 1987 559).

10. According to Wayne Glausser, the semi-colon, still highly popular in the 19th century, is an ambiguous punctuation mark; its grammatical purpose is to bind independent clauses, but it can also signal and contribute to moment of deviation, “when someone or something is thrown off track” (Glausser 317).

11. See Hester Blum’s analysis of dashes in “Douglass’s and Melville’s ‘Alphabets of the Blind.’”

12. The rejection of the “table” as a rule and system able to hold and contain the copyist is made explicit in the narrator’s description: “Nippers would sometimes impatiently rise from his seat, [...] seize the whole desk, and move it, and jerk it, with a grim, grinding motion on the floor, as if the table were a perverse voluntary agent, intent on thwarting and vexing him.” (18)

13. For C. Watson, in some cases the use of italics may even aim to turn the readers into “virtual witnesses” (665).

14. According to *The Online Etymology Dictionary*, the English word “queer,” c. 1500, “strange, peculiar, odd, eccentric,” comes from the Scottish, perhaps from Low German (Brunswick dialect), *queue*, “oblique, off-center,” which is related to the German *quer*, “oblique, perverse, odd,” from Old High German *twerh*, “oblique.” But the *Oxford English Dictionary* objects to this etymology on grounds of timing and sense.

15. But if italicization is visually relevant, it is also aurally telling, as it points first to voice rather than to writing, to phemeine rather than phenomenon. With the reclining italics, the printed character somehow evades his restricted space, but the lawyer makes it sure that the scribe remains always within hearing. From the start Bartleby is thus removed from the narrator’s sight but not from his voice, in an imperfect state of isolation which already seems to foreshadow the failure of any measure intended to shut him in: “Still further to a satisfactory arrangement, I procured a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice.” (19)

16. The narrator of *Pierre* resorts to a clear mathematical analogy in the famous passage: “But ignorant of its quantity as yet, or fearful of ascertaining it; like an algebraist, for the real Lucy he, in his scheming thoughts, had substituted but a sign—some empty x—and in the ultimate solution of the problem, that empty x still figured; not the real Lucy” (183).
17. “And some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher [...]” (Melville 1988, 430).

18. In her Deleuze-based reading of Bartleby’s bachelorhood, Arsić concludes that “Bartleby must become the closeness and fullness of a cipher, which is to say not only that Bartleby stops writing, but also that he stops being written, that he escapes the inscription of the law upon his body and thus the possibility of being read by it. He is neither written nor readable” (Arsić 2005, 98)

19. I am grateful to Édouard Marsoin for sharing his remarks about the image of the empty cipher in Melville’s work.

ABSTRACTS

Melville’s famous tale relies on a significant number of attempts to “measure” or “fathom” what the narrator himself calls “the unaccountable Bartleby.” Paradoxically, if we accept the narrator’s inaugural statement assessing Bartleby as “an irreparable loss to literature,” how can the scrivener’s “presence” be measured in Melville’s fiction? The aim of the paper is to study the unaccountability of Bartleby from a writerly angle, mainly focusing on the use of typography and punctuation in the text (italics, inverted commas) which literally attempt to corner an irreducible presence in their signs. From the first apparition of the enigmatic scribe to the literary “advent of Bartleby” the problematic exposition of the ever-escaping figure will be studied.

Le célèbre conte de Melville repose sur un nombre significatif de tentatives pour « mesurer » ou « sonder » ce que le narrateur qualifie lui-même d’« inexplicable Bartleby ». Paradoxalement, si nous acceptons la déclaration inaugurale du narrateur qui jauge Bartleby à l’aune de la « perte irréparable pour la littérature » qu’il représente, comment la « présence » du scribe peut-elle être mesurée dans la fiction de Melville ? Le but de cet article est d’étudier l’impossibilité de rendre compte du personnage d’un point de vue scriptural et littéraire, en se concentrant principalement sur l’utilisation de la typographie et de la ponctuation dans le texte (italiques, guillemets) qui tentent de capter cette irréductible présence dans leurs signes. De la première apparition du scribe énigmatique à « l’avènement » littéraire de Bartleby, l’exposition problématique de cette figure sera étudiée.

INDEX

Keywords: account, Bartleby, fiction, figure, measure, Melville, punctuation, typography
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