

# Bartleby or a Loose Existence: Melville with Jonathan Edwards

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*Following allusions that Melville scatters throughout “Bartleby the Scrivener,” the article develops the writer’s subtle criticism of Jonathan Edwards. The attorney’s way of thinking is taken as an example of reasoning on the basis of “necessary” assumptions, which Melville finds in Edwards’ “The Freedom of the Will.” From the perspective of that philosophy, Bartleby’s existence appears inexplicable, or understandable only as a “loose existence,” which, according to Edwards, would have to represent an error in the universe. By analyzing Edwards’ (the attorney’s) way of thinking, the author advances arguments concerning the identity of persons as well as the complex relationship the story constructs between certain types of activity and passivity.*

Those whom books will hurt will not be proof against events.  
Events, not books, should be forbid.  
—Herman Melville, *The Encantadas*

According to the attorney the main problem with Bartleby is that he is no problem at all. A problem can be solved or at least displaced whereas with Bartleby we are faced with an “un-heard of perplexity.”<sup>1</sup> Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary says that in a slightly obsolete sense—contemporary to the attorney’s usage—perplexity refers to what is intricate or difficult. Intricate, however, is neither complex nor complicated but involuted: “A thing is complex when it is made up of many interrelated parts; it is complicated when those parts are so many or so arranged as to make it difficult to understand their relationship; it is intricate when it has numerous windings and confused involutions which are difficult to follow.” In mathematics involution is the raising of a quantity to *any* given power; in grammar it is a construction created by a clause separating subject from predicate; in biology it is a degenerate change, but in medicine it is the return of an organ to its normal site. In short, involution is the site of confluence of the normal and the anomalous, finite and infinite, subject and predicate. It signifies both “anything that involves something” and “anything that is itself involved into something,” which is why it is the confusion of exteriority and interiority. And what can be more confusing than that? To make things even more perplexed, the perplexity called Bartleby is not just any perplexity but an “un-heard of perplexity,” the unthinkable raised to any given power of unthinkability as it were. This is the point at which the

“Bartleby” case would have to be closed. For if Bartleby is the unthinkable, then there remains nothing to be said about him.

If the attorney is not “silent of what he cannot speak” it is because, in a certain sense, he *has* to try to untangle this perplexity. He has to not only because Bartleby is a threat to his property or business but also, as it turns out, to his “head,” to the way he thinks and acts. One should not forget that Bartleby appears as an “un-heard of perplexity” precisely to the lawyer; Bartleby perplexes his judgment. His thinking cannot think Bartleby’s thinking; to his thinking Bartleby’s thinking appears as a non-thinking. On the other hand—and this is what disturbs the lawyer—if Bartleby’s non-thinking is a thinking of some sort, then the attorney’s thinking faces in Bartleby its own failure. The stakes in the game played in the office of the law are “absolute”: either my way of thinking or yours. The attorney therefore relates the story of himself and Bartleby as the story of two irreducibly different ways of thinking. *Bartleby the Scrivener* could therefore be called Melville’s version of *What is called thinking?* But what is it that is called thinking and what calls for thinking here? Let us start with the attorney: what is called thinking for the attorney, how does he think?

The attorney’s own description of his thinking is reflexive. That is to say, he describes the process of his thinking that has already taken place in such a way as to turn the description itself into the very process of thinking that he is describing (he is describing a praxis by practicing it in the process of its description). This description applies to what will explicitly be called “the procedure of thinking,” namely the reasons why the attorney thought that Bartleby would have to leave the office after being fired, that is to say, after the following exchange: “‘The time has come; you must quit this place; I am sorry for you; here is money; but you must go.’ ‘I would prefer not,’ he replied, with his back still towards me. ‘You *must*.’ He remained silent.”<sup>2</sup> As must be the case in the world of the absolute force of the law, *must* is the last word of this conversation, the announcement of the force of necessity. The idea that after “must” is pronounced its execution will necessarily follow thus points to another idea: that there is an immanent (almost necessary) relationship between will, thinking, desiring and acting. And so, after masterfully managing to fire Bartleby, the attorney engages himself in thinking about his own act and about the thought that has determined it. He thus thinks his thinking: “As I walked home in a pensive mood, my vanity got the better of my pity. I could not but highly plume myself on my masterly management in getting rid of Bartleby. Masterly I call it and such it *must*

appear to any dispassionate thinker. The beauty of my procedure seemed to consist in its perfect quietness. There was no vulgar bullying, no bravado of any sort, no choleric hectoring. . . . Nothing of the kind. Without loudly bidding Bartleby depart—as an inferior genius might have done—I *assumed* the ground that depart he must; and upon the assumption built all I had to say.”<sup>3</sup> The last word that the attorney addressed to Bartleby—*must*—is now repeated but in a totalizing way. For in this context it says at least three things at the same time. First, it says that “I, the attorney,” am the superior genius, my way of thinking is *the way of thinking* (it is thus a self-identificatory mark, which curiously enough identifies him as a thinker, as a philosopher and not as a lawyer). Second, it says that if we, the readers or witnesses of this procedure, fail to acknowledge this thinking as superior thinking (as we *must*) we should be identified only as “inferior” thinkers (it is thus an identificatory mark that legitimizes and/or disqualifies the thinking of another). And, finally, it says that should Bartleby fail to obey this “must” we, being all superior thinkers, will disqualify him as the thinker, identify him as somebody who does not think. But what is the beauty of the attorney’s procedure? What does its nobility (its quietness) consist in so as to escape the vulgarity of obviousness?

The attorney gives us some clues that allow us to unfold his quiet procedure: “I *assumed*,” he says, “the ground that depart he must; and upon the assumption built all I had to say,” all he had to say being precisely the “must.” Thus the fact that he italicizes both “assumed” and “must” merely restates what was already stated in his description of the procedure; he insists, namely, on the fact that there is a connection between an assumption (what is only probable), the ground or reason for that assumption (“I assumed the ground”) and the final result of the series of assumptions (the truth). It says that the assumed reason on which he based his thinking is its final and necessary outcome, which then, being the truth, turns assumption into a necessary truth, negating its being a “supposition.” It says that the relation between assumption and conclusion is one of necessity. The “must” addressed to Bartleby as the assumed reason was thus the “prospect” of the whole chain of reasoning that led to the final “must,” which turned out to be not only the retrospect of the “prospect” but the assimilation of “prospect” and “retrospect.” Hence an image of thought appears: it becomes clear that the attorney bases his thinking on a philosophy that calls itself the “doctrine of assumptions” (which is precisely how he terms his own “procedure” of thinking), and which tries to establish a necessary connection between “the

assumption of reason” and its “absolutely necessary conclusion” through a very particular formulation of the relationship among the faculties of the mind. It becomes clear that we are dealing here with the philosophy of Jonathan Edwards, whose work the attorney will inform us, he read, in order to discern the reasons why his thinking did not have any effect on *Bartleby*. He read, as I believe we must, Edwards’ treatise on the *Freedom of the Will* and (for quite different reasons) Priestley’s treatise on Necessity.

Far from being, as is commonly believed, a minor variation on Locke, Edwards’ work emerged as a radical resistance to the former’s philosophy of thinking and self-identity, as a thinking so different from “old” (European) thought, that it would cause a “great turbulence” of thinking, to become known as the “great awakening.” What is Edwards’ key intervention? The will, says Edwards is the power of acting, the power of actualization of the potentiality to act. “Willing” is the act of will because it is the act of choosing. The will is always faced with at least two possibilities but prefers one. Thus, being the power to elect one thing rather than another the will is, in each of its acts or preferences, both the power of affirmation and the power of negation: by preferring one thing the will affirms (it wills) its existence and therefore negates the existence of the other: “If any think it is more perfect definition of the will to say, that, It is that by which the soul either *chooses* or *refuses*, I content with it; though I think that it is enough to say, It is that by which the soul chooses: for in every act of will whatsoever, the mind chooses one thing rather than another; it chooses something rather than the contrary, or rather than the want of non-existence of that thing.”<sup>4</sup> The will is thus nothing other than the power of preference.

But preference is power because before choosing anything in particular and even by not choosing or preferring anything in particular, it prefers to prefer. In other words, if preference is the same thing as choosing it is because by preferring itself it chooses itself and thus chooses to prefer instead of not to prefer. From this perspective, *Bartleby*’s “I would prefer not to” (whose object remains undecided, for it is not clear whether there is something in particular that he prefers not to, or that he prefers the “not to” itself) is the act of preference for the undecided choice, the power of its affirmation. It is thus an affirmation of the choice (to prefer) that, as any choice, both affirms and negates. And to the extent that it does not specify the particular object of its preference it specifies the preference itself as its own object, it announces pure will. “I would prefer” is the formula of the pure power of the will, the performance of its “pure” act.<sup>5</sup>

That is, says Edwards, precisely how Mr. Locke determined the will when he said that “The will signifies nothing but power or ability to prefer or choose. The word preferring seems best to express the act of volition.”<sup>6</sup> However, immediately after offering this determination of the will (“to will is to prefer”), Locke sets about arguing for a complication (of which Edwards is very aware) that will undermine the felicity of his initial equation. For, says Locke, it is true that preference is the same as the will but not precisely. Namely, between will and preference there emerges a small difference. And what is more, he adds, I now want to *warn the reader* that I said that the will is the same as preference only for want of a better word, only because words failed me: “Such is the difficulty of explaining and giving clear notions of internal actions by sounds, that I must here warn my reader that ordering, directing, choosing, preferring, &c. which I have made use of, will not distinctly enough express volition ... For example, preferring, which seems perhaps best to express the act of volition, does it not precisely. For though a man *would prefer* flying to walking, yet who can say he ever wills it?”<sup>7</sup> Something rather curious appears in this formulation: what expresses the act of volition precisely does it not precisely. It is possible that the will does not will a flying body at the same time as preference prefers it. It is possible that preference opposes the will, preferring something that the will does not want (thus preferring it involuntarily). And, by the same token, it is possible that the will wills something that it does not prefer, thus willing whatever it wills indifferently. The little difference (“not precisely”) becomes the irreducible difference (precisely not). For what is at stake in this difference is nothing less than a difference between involuntary preference and indifferent will.

Things became even more complicated for Edwards once Locke introduced his determination of desire. For, says Edwards, Mr. Locke claims that “well considered it can be plainly shown ‘that will is perfectly distinguished from desire; which in the very same action may have a quite contrary tendency from that which our will sets upon.’”<sup>8</sup> Thus, within one and the same act the will wants one thing, preference prefers another, desire desires a third, and thought thinks of a fourth. For Mr. Locke also held the power of thinking to be irreducibly different from the power of willing: “The power of thinking operates not on the power of choosing, nor the power of choosing on the power of thinking; no more than the power of dancing operates on the power of singing.”<sup>9</sup> By this point we have a rather curious person, one who has indifferent will, involuntary preference, non-voluntary desire, and

non-elective thought, while at the same time dancing and singing. It is true that the “mind operates, and exerts these powers,”<sup>10</sup> but since those powers are multiple, since they are irreducibly different and able to contradict one another in the same act, the “one and the same” mind that exerts them has to be multiple.<sup>11</sup>

Edwards is horrified by this extravagance verging on madness, and for at least two reasons. The first reason is related to the case in which all the mind’s powers are focused on one object but have different inclinations: for example, all the powers of the mind could be focused on copying documents but each of them could lead that mind in a different direction. What happens then? At the very moment in which the will is about to choose (to copy) there emerges the desire that does not desire what the will wills (the desire not to copy). Since the powers are distinct they do not mediate one another. Everything will then depend on their sheer force: the force of desire can “conquer” the will from within and bring its action to a halt. This is Locke’s fundamental difference between “to be free to will” and “to have free will.”<sup>12</sup> The will is always free to will but is not always the free will. Into the act performed by its power another power (thinking, desiring) inserts its own power and thus paralyzes the will, making a person incapable of performing the act (of volition). The same holds for every power and its action. Every power can be disseminated by the force of another power. Powers, which manifest themselves by acting on each other, could thus have as the outcome of their action a powerless individual, incapable of acting. In the core of Locke’s person of pure powers and their activity there appears a fragile individual brought to a standstill, an endless hesitation before the act, passivity unable to perform anything—Hamlet.

The second reason for Edwards’ disturbance is related to the case in which the different inclinations of various powers are directed to different objects, so that all of them can be successfully realized. In that case a person can simultaneously will to dance, to prefer flying to dancing, to desire sleeping, and to think, for example about Locke’s philosophy of the mind. That is all nice and fine as long as we restrict ourselves to questions of flying or walking. But what happens—and this is Edwards’ major concern—if a person refuses to obey God, ministers, church, law, contract or the attorney? Who or what performs that refusal? And how are we going to know that if the mind is multiple? How are we going to discern if it was only the will that refused obedience while desire wanted it or while thought was in favor of it? And vice versa: what if a person obeys the law while thinking against

it, while desiring its destruction? How are we going to know if somebody *really* believes in God if they can perform all the rituals without ever actually believing?

In asking these questions Edwards is not interested in strategies of punishment. Since punishment comes as the effect of an act, it is a defensive action and therefore should be left to society and to God. For his part Edwards wants to find a way of negating the gap between faculties, of establishing an absolutely necessary relation among them so that by uttering “I believe” a person is uttering the “absoluteness” of his belief, and so that one can be sure that whoever says “I believe” wills and desires his belief. The stakes of his intervention are thus not only epistemological but, more importantly, political. For only on condition that the gap between willing, thinking, desiring and acting is overcome can one be sure that whoever obeys the law does it because all his thoughts willfully support that law. Only on condition that the gap is negated can one be sure that whoever obeys the law will not *change* it. Edwards’ epistemology is thus a project of the colonization of the mind: he seeks to make it a unified field of powers which all serve one goal (one law, one God). Differently put, his is the project of disciplining the mind, where discipline means not only subjection to the law but desire for it, love of it.<sup>13</sup> Obviously, no law is safe, no technology of discipline is possible if Locke was right. For if the powers are different then it is not possible to influence them all and control their multiplicity.

Overwhelmed by the awesome consequences of Locke’s theory, Edwards undertakes to radically reformulate it. Locke, he informs us, was not attentive enough in his analysis of the will and preference. For “if we carefully distinguish the proper objects of the several acts of the will, it will not appear ... that there is any difference between volition and preference.”<sup>14</sup> It is not possible to prefer flying to walking while one is walking. Will and preference is one and the same thing. It goes without saying that Edwards also found Locke to be very careless when the latter claimed the difference between the will and desire in one and the same act. For if we carefully consider the matter it will turn out that “the thing which he [a man] wills, the very same he desires; and he does not will a thing, and desire the contrary, in any particular.”<sup>15</sup> Will, desire and preference are absolutely identical in each act. All the powers are one and they are all the power of acting. A man is thus a monolithic activity with no cracks in it, no possibility for the failure of action, no possibility for split and hesitation.

For Edwards, the question now becomes: what happens (this was the key Armenian example over which Edwards waged his war) if, faced with two objects, the will remains indifferent? How are we going to determine that there is will at all if no sign of difference or preference appears? The beauty of Edwards' approach to this question is that he doesn't offer a circular answer. He doesn't simply say that in order to be indifferent the will has to will its indifference. He makes a more cunning move, raising the stakes of the game. The will, he says, *can be indifferent*, but only after perception has perceived objects and after thinking has thought them. Which comes down to saying that an indifferent will is impossible in so far as perception perceives and thinking thinks only by preferring an object, only by willing: "It will always be so among a number of objects in view; one will prevail in the eye, or in idea, beyond others. When we have our eyes open in the clear sunshine, many objects strike the eye at once, and innumerable images may be at once painted in it by the rays of light; but the attention of the mind is not equal to several of them at once; and so it is with respect to the ideas of the mind in general; several ideas are not in equal strength in the mind's view and notice at once."<sup>16</sup> As the framing of the perceptual field, perception is the power of election. The same holds for thinking. Every thought is the act by which thinking prefers to think that particular thought. This is not to say that there is a will behind every perception and thought, but rather that there is will within them. Thus, instead of speaking about the relationship between will and thinking one should allow for their identity: "Besides, if the dictate of the understanding, and determination of the will, be the same, this confounds the understanding and will, and makes them the same. Whether they be the same or no, I will not now dispute."<sup>17</sup>

Several consequences follow. 1) If every sensation and thought is willed then the will can be indifferent only if there is no perceiving or thinking whatsoever. Indifferent will thus equals death. 2) If everything is willed then not only is there no such thing as "innocent" thought but, more importantly, one should be held responsible for each perception, thought and dream. Something like absolute responsibility and guilt emerges. 3) Introduction of the always willful thought changes the relation between thinking and doing for each thought or perception is the *action* of the will: "and in this case not only is it true that it is easy for a man to do the thing if he will, but the very willing is the doing; when once he has willed, the thing is performed and nothing else remains to be done."<sup>18</sup> 4) Thus the idea of the deed is changed. If the very perceiving or thinking is the doing then there "remains nothing



[else] to be done.” 5) This opens up the possibility of a strange paradox, namely that the body can be absolutely passive and speechless and yet totally active, for every impression or affection is already a willed action even though no action follows it. In other words, there is no such thing as receptivity for every sensation is already a performance of the will.<sup>19</sup> 6) This introduces a radical idea of performative, one that excludes the possibility of the non-performative. To think something like non-performance is to will, which is why a non-performance is only a performative: “Therefore, in these things to ascribe a non-performance to the want of power or ability, is not just.”<sup>20</sup> A man is thus a performative that never fails. A gigantic hive of activity.

Seen through Edwardian glasses, the ones the attorney puts on when he reads *Bartleby*, a curious image appears. To say that *Bartleby* is doing something (brushing his hair, walking slowly, eating ginger, drinking water) has the same performative force as to say that he is not doing anything (falling into his dead wall reveries, lying on the bench, sitting on the banister), for in all those innumerable cases he is simply performing his will. When he therefore says “I would prefer not [to]” he is performing a deed in the same way in which he is performing his will when he is absolutely silent. To say that by saying “rather not” he remains in suspense; to say that by not copying or not conversing he is remaining passive, is therefore only to say that he wills the indetermination of his will. Suspense as well as passivity is nothing other than a different form of enforcing an action. That is why all those actions, even when they are “absent,” can be interpreted as the activity of resistance, which is how the attorney reads *Bartleby*’s passivity when he says that “nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance.”<sup>21</sup> There is no way out of activity.

*Bartleby* thus becomes the monolithic activity of the will: a self inhabited exclusively by itself, incapable of any receptivity, a room with no windows and a locked door. This is precisely the attorney’s image of *Bartleby*: “I was fumbling under the door mat for the key, which *Bartleby* was to have left there for me, when accidentally my knee knocked against a panel, producing a summoning sound, and in response a voice came to me from within—“Not yet; I am occupied.” It was *Bartleby*.”<sup>22</sup> The “ruse” of *Bartleby*’s answer lies in its literality. *Bartleby* does not let the attorney into the space of the office precisely because he is occupied, occupation here referring to the mode of his existence (to the way he is: “I *am* occupied”). The room locked from inside, which does not allow another to enter, becomes the image of *Bartleby*’s self. In the space in which there are no others, “I

am occupied” can only mean “I am occupied by myself, in myself” and my door is closed now.

Bartleby seems thus to have reversed Kafka’s parable of the law, as if he had managed to go behind the doorkeeper’s back, to step over the threshold of the law and then to close the open gate, thus keeping the man of the law, the doorkeeper, outside of the law. In other words, as if in contrast to Kafka’s doorkeeper, who claimed that “this door was open for you,” Bartleby instead says “this door is closed, and will not be open for you.” By closing the door Bartleby turns the lawyer into the outsider. That is why the attorney is negated or, as he puts it, “killed at his own door,” by Bartleby’s “I am occupied,” that is, by a response that announced the end of any further exchange: “I was thunderstruck,” says the attorney. “For an instant I stood like the man who, pipe in mouth, was killed one cloudless afternoon long ago in Virginia, by summer lightning; at his own warm open window he was killed, and remained leaning out there upon the dreamy afternoon, till some one touched him, when he fell.”<sup>23</sup> By the force of Bartleby’s will the attorney is relegated to a spectral existence.

One may well ask, however, why the attorney was so taken aback? Why did his own negation come to him as lightning from the cloudless sky? To say that he was surprised by Bartleby’s resistance misses the point, for the attorney, being Edwards’ philosophical disciple, knows or should know that Bartleby’s “I would prefer [not to]” is nothing other than the expression of the power of his will. If he is nevertheless taken aback by Bartleby’s response it is because the encounter between the attorney and Bartleby points to an abyssal problem in Edwards’ system (of which the attorney becomes painfully aware), which can be summed up as follows: if every subject is a subject that performs the absolute will without exception and excuse, what happens in the encounter of two wills that each will a different thing: what happens if the attorney wills Bartleby out of the office whereas Bartleby prefers not to leave it? The attorney explicitly refers to this problem: “It was a truly beautiful thought to have assumed Bartleby’s departure; but after all that assumption was simply my own, and none of Bartleby’s.”<sup>24</sup> How to reconcile two wills in such a way that both perform their force? Edwards’ answer (which, as we shall see, the attorney adopts entirely) is rooted in his trust in enlightenment. Namely, since the will is thinking, then thinking exposed to rational argumentation based on the utterances of “full, fixed or certain connexion between the subject and the predicate”<sup>25</sup> would always prefer the better thing. In the end there will be no two wills willing opposite things.<sup>26</sup>

That is the thesis the attorney accepts: if he bases his argument on one of three possible relations between subject and predicate, whoever is exposed to that argument will be transformed and awakened (and being awakened he will either start copying or leave the office). But what three connections will help the attorney to determine his will? In the book the attorney reads Edwards provides a very precise answer to this question.

The first connection between the subject and the predicate of an utterance (on the basis of which one determines one's preferences), the one he calls "full connection," is perfect "because it may imply a contradiction or gross absurdity to suppose them not connected."<sup>27</sup> Such a connection states mathematical or metaphysical truths that are eternal (two plus two equals four; God created everything out of nothing, and so on). Since the truth stated by those utterances is eternal it is also absolutely necessary (in and of itself, out of time and independent of context).

The second relation is fixed. The argument based on it is composed of utterances that claim something about the past and establish a causal relation between that past and the present. The connection between subject and predicate is fixed because "the existence of that thing is already come to pass, and either now is or has been, and so has, as it were, made sure of existence ... Thus, the existence of whatever is already come to pass, is now become necessary."<sup>28</sup> "Bartleby is in the room now because he entered it a second ago" is an example of such an utterance.

The third connection is the most problematic, since people do not spend their time thinking about eternal truths or about past events. To the contrary, on the basis of what now is they try to determine an action that will have certain consequences in the future. But how to think or prefer what does not exist (what is in the future)? How to perform an act now that will necessarily lead to a desired future consequence, say to Bartleby's leaving the office? As will become immediately clear, the attorney accepts Edwards' answer to this question: one has to base the act of the will on the argument whose utterances build a "certain" connection between subject and predicate. In other words one has to build one's argument on what the attorney, following Edwards, calls the doctrine of assumption or *the assumption or supposition based on the ground*. Here is Edwards' explanation: "And here it may be observed, that all things which are future, or which will hereafter begin to be, which can be said to be necessary, are necessary only in this last way: their existence is not necessary in itself; for if so, they always would have existed. Nor is their existence become necessary by being made

sure, by being already come to pass. Therefore, the only way that any thing that is to come to pass hereafter, is or can be necessary, is by a connexion with something that already is, or has been; so that the one being supposed, the other certainly follows. And this, also, is the only way that all things past, excepting those which were from eternity, could be necessary *before they come to pass*, or could come to pass necessarily; and therefore the only way in which any effect or event, or any thing whatsoever that ever has had or will have a beginning, has come into being necessarily, or will hereafter necessarily exist. And therefore, *this* is the necessity which especially belongs to controversies about the acts of the will.”<sup>29</sup>

Excepting absolutely necessary truths (which are outside of time), all other things are temporal and therefore causally connected. For Edwards causal connection is a connection of certainty: from a certain cause a consequence will certainly follow, which is to say with relative necessity. Now, that necessity is relative means only that God could have connected cause and consequence in a different way (in difference to the eternal truths that not even God could have established differently). Relative necessity is therefore relative only from the perspective of God, whereas from the perspective of the finite being even such a relative necessity is absolute; from the act of a finite being a consequence will necessarily follow. It is therefore enough to assume a reasonable ground for a thing and it will necessarily follow from that assumption. The meaning of assumption is thus changed. To assume does not mean to leave space for uncertainty but to claim with absolute certainty that something will come to pass. The attorney holds strongly to this assumption of assumption, so strongly that he feels necessary to graphically draw attention, by means of italics, to the fact that his “procedure” of thinking was based on such theory of assumption: “I *assumed* the ground that depart he must; and upon the assumption built all I had to say...”

However, to suppose certain connections among everything is to negate the accident of an interruption between what was and what will be, which thereby negates the assumption. The assumption is certain only if there is no such thing as accident. And so, there is no such thing as accident: “As the acts of the will, in each step of the fore-mentioned procedure, do not come to pass without a particular cause, every act is owing to a prevailing inducement so the accident, as I have called it, or that which happens in the unsearchable course of things, to which the mind yields itself, and by which it is guided, is not any thing that comes to pass without a cause...”<sup>30</sup> That there is no event means that there is nothing inexplicable. The world reads as one huge organic narration.

The finite person is such a universe in miniature. He is the continuity of the “connection of certainty,” of all his thoughts, desires and volitions. His existence is “fixed.” Everybody is accountable, from people all the way to flying spiders.<sup>31</sup> To suppose the opposite would mean to suppose the possibility of an event or of an interrupted connection. And that, according to Edwards, is impossible: “For if the event be not connected with the cause, it is not dependent on the cause; its existence is as it were, loose from its influence, and may attend it or may not... And to say the event is not dependent on its cause is absurd.”<sup>32</sup> There are no “loose existences.” But to say that what will be is already inscribed in what was, is to read the connection of certainty as the connection of necessity. It supposes that the unknown (the future) is already inscribed in the text “written” in the past. That is why thinking based on the doctrine of assumption can, as the attorney made clear, go both ways, retrospectively as well as prospectively: “Yes, as before I had prospectively assumed that Bartleby would depart, so now I might retrospectively assumed that departed he was.”<sup>33</sup>

Yet, even though the attorney’s argument is, as he put it, “legitimate,” even though his thinking is based on a true “procedure” according to which it has to be necessary for Bartleby to leave the office, he nevertheless doubts whether Bartleby *will* leave (“I walked down town, arguing the probabilities *pro* and *con*”), as if the beauty and legitimacy of his thinking procedure has left him unconvinced. What is more, now openly parodying Edwards’ philosophical enterprise, the attorney informs us how “nevertheless, next morning, upon awakening, I had my doubts.”<sup>34</sup> He was awakened, all right, but instead of being awakened into Edwards’ great awakening, into the certainty of a beautifully connected world, he was awakened into the instability of doubt. If he is now headed down the road to skepticism then the reason for this journey along unbeaten tracks should be sought in the critique of Edwards’ philosophy that the attorney himself provided.

The attorney’s objection could be summed up in the following way: the doctrine of assumption itself depends on an assumption that has to be proven instead of serving as the basis for the various proofs that Edwards offered. The supposition is certain because all things are necessarily connected only if things *are* necessarily connected. The doctrine of assumption is therefore “valid” only if it can prove that its formal argumentation is based on the existence of what it claims to be true. And that is precisely what it cannot prove. Edwards’ doctrine of suppositions therefore appears merely as a strictly “logical” (empty) argumentation having no thetic power, no power

to enact what it claims. The theory of absolute performative power has no performative power whatsoever. The attorney formulates this objection in terms of a difference between “pure” theory, one without performative force, and practice: “My procedure,” says he, “seemed as sagacious as ever, - but only in theory. How it would prove in practice—there was the rub.”<sup>35</sup> By claiming there to be a gap between (pure) theory and practice the attorney implies that far from being a profound understanding of the “nature” of man, Edwards’ theory is a mere “form,” a “construction,” a theory *ad hominem*. For, as becomes clear, a theoretician who advances Edwards’ philosophy can either close his eyes to the reality that fails to adjust to his theory, behaving as if it were not there (which brings him close to certain types of madness); or, he can decide to manifest the performative force of his argument by “adjusting” the other to himself, by violently “applying” physical force to the body of the other. In other words, the attorney can “successfully” apply the doctrine of assumption either by closing his eyes to the fact that Bartleby is in the office or by removing Bartleby’s body from that office. As he puts it: “In the legitimate carrying out of this assumption I might enter my office in a great hurry, and pretending not to see Bartleby at all, walk straight against him as if he were air. It was hardly possible that Bartleby could withstand such an application of the doctrine of assumptions.”<sup>36</sup> The only problem, as the attorney ironically states, is that bodies are not pure air, so that the “legitimate carrying out of the assumption” would end in a non-legitimate intervention upon the body of the other.

If indeed the attorney declines to apply “his” theory in such a non-legitimate way it could be because he is also very sensitive to other philosophical arguments. Since we know that he read Priestley we can assume that he knew of Priestley’s criticism of Edwards. It is true that in his *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated*, Joseph Priestley—the very same to whom Jefferson will explain in a letter how what was going on in the “heavenly country” known as America marks a new chapter in the history of man<sup>37</sup>—praised Edwards for his “many valuable remarks on this subject, and upon the whole [for having] satisfactorily answered the objections to the doctrine of necessity.”<sup>38</sup> And yet, even though on the whole Priestley finds Edwards’ answers satisfactory, there is a crack in this “wholeness” located at a pivotal point in the whole system. As Priestley put it: “But if there be any foundation for the doctrine of necessity, i.e. if all events arise from preceding situations, and the *original situations* of all things, together with the laws by which all changes of situation take place, were fixed by the Divine Being, there can be

no difference whatever with respect to his causation of one thing more than another. And even whatever takes place in consequence of his withholding his special and extraordinary influence, is as much agreeable to his will as what comes to pass in consequence of the general laws of nature.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, if everything has to be necessary in order for us to be able to account for it and to subsume it under the law; if every future is thus inscribed in an immemorial past; if there is no possible hope of an event, then the activity of the will is completely mechanical and therefore involuntary. Not only, therefore, that the will does not have any reason to act, but its very action is not its activity for what seems to be its action is but the action of God who has always already decided everything. The will is thus the abolition of the will and its actions. The theory of the absolute activity of the will thus turns out to be the theory of its absolute passivity.<sup>40</sup>

Conversely, as soon as one allows the possibility of an event in order to escape radical passivity, the whole theory of certain connections and assumptions has to be abandoned. The moment accident is possible, no connection can remain certain. If there are accidents, then impossibility (which for Edwards means chance) is possible. But impossibility, he claims, means only that the negative necessity is possible: “Impossibility is the same as the negative necessity, or a necessity that a thing should not be.”<sup>41</sup> Simply put, if the event is possible then it is also possible that what should not be will be; all the categories that give the world its unity fall apart. For the event is not simply what the finite mind cannot foresee, as “when things come to pass ... without our foreknowledge, and beside our design and scope.”<sup>42</sup> Rather, the event is what is without any connection with causes or antecedents, what is therefore without history, origin or future. It is loose existence, the unaccountable, the interruption of the course of the world.

This then is the attorney’s situation: if the doctrine of assumption is correct in negating the possibility of loose existences, then once it is applied *Bartleby* will have left the office. That *Bartleby* did not leave is living proof of the doctrine’s failure and thus proof of the possibility of a loose existence. This is where the “game” becomes absolute for the attorney. For in view of the possibility of an event there vanishes not only the continuity of the world and along with it God (who by definition has to be able to hold everything together), but, of greater importance to the attorney, the power of the law to impose itself in so far as the law derives its force only from being able to enforce itself in some future. The attorney thus faces the absolute disaster of the world as he sees it, the catastrophe of what holds it together.

To say that the “support” of the law is now shaken, if not negated, is to suggest that in a world of loose existences language itself fails to function. If one decides to read the Edwardian connection of assumptions as the connection among signs (that is, as the logic upon which language is based), then the existence of freely floating singularities that interrupt the connection among words becomes precisely the obstacle over which language as a whole stumbles. One can thus say not only that Bartleby’s “formula” (“I would prefer [not to]”) “ravages” language but that his mere “existence” in the office of the law, his sheer body does so. This is precisely how Gilles Deleuze reads the attorney’s “doctrine of assumptions:” “All language... has references and assumptions. These are not exactly what language designates, but what permit it to designate. A word always presupposes other words that can replace it, complete it, or form alternatives with it; it is on this condition that language is distributed in such a way as to designate things, states of things and actions.”<sup>43</sup> But if everything could be a loose proliferation of events to which no assumption can be applied it follows that a word designating something cannot be replaced or altered by any other word, which is why language itself cannot be distributed. A loose existence brings language to halt, turns it into a passive silence. And where language/or law are made impotent so also are history and/or story. Literature as well as philosophy becomes impossible. As Hillis Miller puts it, “this impossibility means a permanent gap in fulfilling the general responsibility of literature for a full accounting in language for everything that has happened in the real historical world. If something or someone escapes in principle from this general possibility of being accounted for, as the narrator says is the case with Bartleby, then the whole project is endangered. It means there are some things or people that cannot be written, some things that escape the all-including recording power of literature.”<sup>44</sup>

The same holds for the person. Its “continuity” becomes a dissemination of disconnected singular accidents. Priestley is quite aware of this. In the chapter of his treatise *Matter and Spirit* called “Observations on personal identity” he claims that “the identity of the man” does not exist in itself for it has neither beginning nor end being only a proliferation of singularities and events. The man is thus similar to the flux of water: “Ask any person to show you the *river Thames*, and he will point to water flowing in a certain channel, and you will find that he does not consider the *banks*, or the *bed* of the river to be any part of it.”<sup>45</sup> The man is only a provisional assemblage of thoughts, sensations and words that always passes through a “complete



change.”<sup>46</sup> The fact that one can nevertheless speak of a man is for Priestley precisely the effect of the distribution of language, of the grammatical “I” that however does not function as catachresis (as reflexive self-appropriation) but purely nominally, as an empty category: “And yet though the water be continually and visibly changing, so as not to be the same any one day with the preceding, the use of language proves that there is a sense to which it may be called, to every real purpose, the *same river* that it was a thousand years ago.”<sup>47</sup> Yet it is precisely this “use of language” that is now brought to halt. There remains nothing but the flowing.

The attorney now faces such a disaster. The criticism of his favorite philosopher will enable him both to find his way around the obstacles to dealing with Bartleby and to stick to his theory of preferences (for his final decision on this whole philosophical debate will be: Bartleby is the man of preferences, I am the man of assumptions). That is to say: if, against Edwards’ best belief, the person is a multiplicity of its powers, then it follows that will and preference are not after all one and the same thing. The attorney thus adopts a path, neither Edwardsian nor Lockean, according to which powers are neither necessarily the same nor necessarily different. It is this insight that will enable him to read Bartleby “both ways,” as it were, as ambiguity. Thanks to this “middle path” one can say that whenever Bartleby specifies the object of his preference (which happens quite often), preference is the affirmation of a willed choice. Such is the case when Bartleby says “Not now, I am occupied,” “No, I would prefer not to make any change,” “No, I would not like a clerkship,” “I would prefer not to take a clerkship,” “I would not like at all the bar tender’s business,” “No, I would prefer to be doing something else instead of traveling through the country collecting bills for the merchants,” “Not at all. It does not strike me that there is any thing definite about that. I like to be stationary”. The answers bear witness to the fact that far from being “not particular” he is very particular for he knows and says exactly what he wants and wills – something stationary, definite and determinate. In these cases he performs a forceful application of his will that coincides with his preference and desire. And to the extent that such cases manifest Bartleby’s will the attorney is right to read them as passive resistance.

But precisely because the person does not have continuous identity, its discontinuity not only disconnects its different acts of will, but in certain cases also separates will from preference within one and the same instance. That is why there are many cases in which Bartleby’s preference is inde-

terminate and involuntary. As if wanting to avoid any misunderstanding regarding the involuntariness of his preference, in such cases Bartleby does not even use the conditional. In Agamben's words: "When he [the attorney] asks him to go to the post office ('just step around to the Post Office won't you?'), and Bartleby opposes him with his usual 'I would prefer not to,' the man of the law hastily translates Bartleby's answer into 'You *will* not.'" But Bartleby, with his soft but firm voice specifies, "I *prefer* not" ("I *prefer* not" which appears three times, is the only variation of Bartleby's usual phrase; and if Bartleby then renounces the conditional this is only because doing so allows him to eliminate all traces of the verb "will," even in its modal use).<sup>48</sup> The attorney thus reveals that it is possible for there to be preference, one which would prefer without the slightest trace of the will. He reveals that preference is possible as involuntary and non-active, as a performance without performative.

To the extent that preference is involuntary and indeterminate, to the extent it is neither elective nor identificatory, it cannot be caught in a connection of what is, and therefore in the difference between what is and what is not. More precisely, the involuntary preference is something that happens as a contingency that interrupts the connection among manifestations of the will (the connection between the things that are), so disrupting history and the law. This is merely another way of saying that, being indeterminate, the preference cannot be based on what Edwards called the supposition of ground, or on the principle of reason, which is the condition of possibility not only for acts of will but also for any valid assumption (according to Edwards the assumption is always based on the ground which functions precisely to establish the connection between what is and what is only assumed).

Being groundless, the involuntary preference makes possible what for Edwards is absolutely impossible, namely that something can be devoid of reason, that something may or may not be, or even that something may and may not be at the same time—an indeterminate and reasonless existence. According to Agamben's interpretation, Bartleby's "I would rather not," refers precisely to this absence of ground: "In the ascetic *Schlarrafenland* in which Bartleby is at home, there is only a 'rather' fully freed of all ratio, a preference and a potentiality that no longer function to assume the supremacy of Being over Nothing but exist, *without reason*, in the indifference between Being and Nothing."<sup>49</sup> One could thus argue, together with Agamben, that the green screen that the attorney places between Bartleby and himself is not only what separates them, but more importantly that it is the symbol

of a thought not grounded on the principle of reason (a thought that thinks between black and white walls, between determinations): “The green screen that isolates his desk traces the borders of an experimental laboratory in which potentiality... frees itself of the principle of reason.”<sup>50</sup>

Curiously however, when faced with this groundless existence, the attorney reacts in a paradoxical way, namely, by accepting the possibility of pure “preference” and yet reaffirming the theory of assumptions. He decides to try at the same time to save his world and to acknowledge the existence of *Bartleby's*. Considering one more time the doctrine of the assumption and the possibility of the preference without reason, the attorney concludes that “the great point was, not whether I had assumed that he would quit me, but whether he would prefer so to do. He was more the man of preferences than assumptions.”<sup>51</sup> But how are we to read this? To the extent that the man of assumptions remains the man of assumptions, to the extent, that is, that his world remains the world of the law, history and narration, the man of preferences is possible neither as the negation of assumption, nor as a miracle or “mystical beyond,” but only as error (the existence of which is then explained in the same way in which theology explains the existence of “evil” and the like). Something has gone wrong with the connections of things to enable such an error. Accidents and events are therefore not the negation of assumptions but their erroneous relation that will only lead to another assumption. The only thing that the man of the law can do in order to save his world is to admit in a common sense way the possibility of an error and thus give an account of the unaccountable. The attorney therefore appears as having a double strategy, introducing the possibility of an error as an alibi that will enable him to remain faithful to his own philosophy.

In her analysis of Melville, Peggy Kamuf calls his “strategy” of writing “writing on credit”: “Writing on credit is from the very first a double writing that will deploy its thematic or narrative content as a kind of mask, alibi or allegory of its own operation.”<sup>52</sup> If one now decides to extend this interpretation to the attorney’s strategy of narration (and/or of keeping his own world safe), one could claim that the attorney accounts for the unaccountable precisely by narrating on credit, that is, by employing a “double” narration in which the object (or the content) of the narration becomes both the allegory of a gap in the world (an allegory of loss), and the allegory of the way the narration operates. And if, according to Paul de Man’s famous determination, “allegory is sequential and narrative, yet the topic of its narration is not necessarily temporal at all,”<sup>53</sup> then one can safely conclude

that by narrating what is not temporal—by temporalizing the event—the attorney doubles the catastrophic situation that his doctrine of assumptions confronts (and through this doubling, by narrating it, saves it). The attorney is facing the resistance of allegory, the fact that the clarity of his narration cannot narrate its content, that “this emphatic clarity of representation does not stand in the service of something that can be represented.”<sup>54</sup> He thus narrates the error that cannot be explained and represented, that remains for literature an irreparable loss. And by representing his narration as the failure of literary representation he also saves the very possibility of story telling, of history and law. The attorney’s effort to save the law is thus at the same time his effort to save literature. In other words, far from claiming that literature will be endangered by certain characters that cannot be written, he as if maintains that literature will be about writing the impossibility of writing certain people. And as long as narrative narrates the impossibility of narrating the principle of reason remains safe.

### *Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup> Herman Melville, “Bartleby the Scrivener,” in *Melville’s Short Novels*. Ed. Dan McCall, New York: W.W Norton, A Norton Critical Edition, 2002, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Melville, *Bartleby*, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will*. Soli Deo Gloria 1992 reprint of the edition published by Thomas Nelson, London, 1845, p. 2. All interpretations of Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” as negative preference fail to perceive this point on which Edwards insists, namely, that the negative preference is at the same time the “positive” preference, which it both affirms and negates.

<sup>5</sup> This Edwardsian thesis hovers in the background of readings of Bartleby that see him as the embodiment of pure will. For example, Elisabeth Hartdwick’s reading (in “*Bartleby in Manhattan*” and *Other Essays*. New York: Random House, 1983) of a conversation between the attorney and Bartleby, of which I will provide a different interpretation, runs as follows: “On an occasion the lawyer asks Bartleby to go on an errand to the post office. Bartleby replies that he would prefer not to. The lawyer, seeing a possibility for an entropic, involuntary movement in this mastery of meaning, proposes an italicized emendation. He is answered with an italicized insistence.

“You *will* not?”

“I *prefer* not.”

What is the difference between *will not* and *prefer not*? There is no difference insofar as Bartleby’s actions will be altered, but he seems to be pointing out by the italics that his preference is not under the rule of the conditional or the future tense. He does not mean to say that he prefers not, but will if he must, or if it is wished. His “I” that prefers not, will not.”

<sup>6</sup> Edwards, *The Freedom*, p. 2. John Locke, *Essay on Human Understanding*. In *The Works of John Locke*, Vol. I. Scientia Verlag Aalen, Germany, 1963, p. 245.

<sup>7</sup> Locke, *Essay*, p. 244. In his reading of *Bartleby*, Gilles Deleuze points to the “mannerism” of *Bartleby*’s formula “I would prefer not to:” “We immediately notice a certain mannerism, a certain solemnity: *prefer* is rarely employed in this sense, and neither *Bartleby*’s boss, the attorney, nor his clerks normally use it... The usual formula would instead be *I had rather not*. But the strangeness of the formula goes beyond the word itself. Certainly it is grammatically correct, syntactically correct, but its abrupt termination, NOT TO, which leaves what it rejects undetermined, confers upon it the character of a radical, a kind of limit-function” (Gilles Deleuze, “*Bartleby; or, The Formula*,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 68). Without questioning or denying that “manner” I would want to point to the fact that this “mannerism” is a literal quotation of Locke’s formulation. The formula is the formula of British empiricism.

<sup>8</sup> Edwards, *The Freedom*, p. 3. Locke, *Essay*, p. 253.

<sup>9</sup> Locke, *Essay*, p. 246.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 246.

<sup>11</sup> Both the fact that words always miss the “things” and that the mind which operates all the faculties and powers is multiple, formed the basis for Locke’s thesis that “the word *Person* in itself signifies nothing.” Variations of this idea are also found in Hume (“men are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity and are in a perpetual flux and movement”) as well as in Berkeley’s *Commonplace Book*. For detailed analysis of the problem of person in British empiricism (especially in Berkeley) see my *The Passive Eye, Gaze and Subjectivity in Berkeley (via Beckett)*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, esp. pp. 123-125.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 249.

<sup>13</sup> One could read the fact that Edwards was the first American philosopher (of the “colonial” period) as his being the first American philosopher of colonialization. A reading of his philosophy from that perspective remains to be carried out. Melville, as I want to suggest, was quite aware of the stakes of Edwards’ philosophy. When he makes the man of the law, who is by definition the “advocate” of the law, also the advocate of Edwards’ theory, when he identifies the man of the law with the philosopher, he is saying that the philosopher acts here not only as one who thinks the law but also as one who wants to impose and expand it. He turns the lawyer-philosopher into a great disciplinarian.

<sup>14</sup> Edwards, *The Freedom*, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> In his letter to Rev. Dr. Benjamin Colman, in which he explains the phenomenon latter to become known as the “great awakening,” Edwards comments on “many odd and strange stories that have been carried about the country of this affair.” It seems that a num-

ber of people sank into absolute passivity (refusing to work) after being overwhelmed by images of Edwards' "angry good": "Some indeed under great terrors of conscience have had impressions on their imaginations; and also under the power of spiritual discoveries, they have had lively impressed ideas of Christ shedding blood for sinners, his blood running from his veins, and of Christ in his glory in heaven and such like things... There have been several persons that have had their natures overborne under strong convictions... There is no oddity of behavior prevails; and doubtless some persons under the strength of impressions that are made of their minds and under the power of strong affections, are guilty of imprudences; their zeal may need to be regulated by more prudence, and they may need a guide to their assistance." Jonathan Edwards, Letter to Rev. Dr. Benjamin Colman, May 30, 1735 [The Great Awakening], in: *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Vol. A., New York: Norton & Company, 2003, p. 496. In other words, he is saying that they should be held responsible/guilty for the "impressions" that affected them, for impressions are already willed, no such thing as pure receptivity being possible.

<sup>20</sup> Edwards, *The Freedom*, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> Melville, *Bartleby*, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 24.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 24. One should note that the attorney will come to contemplate murdering Bartleby only after being "killed" by him: "But when this old Adam of resentment rose in me and tempted me concerning Bartleby, I grappled him and threw him. How? Why, simply by recalling the divine injunction: '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. Men have committed murder for jealousy's sake, and anger's sake, and hatred's sake, and selfishness' sake, and spiritual pride's sake; but no man that ever I heard of, ever committed a diabolical murder for sweet charity's sake." (p. 25) In other words, the old commandment of resentment and retribution is here replaced by the new commandment not to kill. The attorney's charity should thus be regarded as his restraining from resentment and retribution.

<sup>24</sup> Melville, *Bartleby*, p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> Edwards, *The Freedom*, p. 19. In a different context that analyzes Emerson's philosophy of history, Eduardo Cadava points to the fact that eloquence and rhetoric were important political means in the country of free men: "Free men need to be persuaded rather than coerced." However, "the same rhetoric that renders freedom possible may also restrict it. We could even say that the history of the American experiment, from its beginnings on through the Civil War, can be read as the confirmation of this truth. The colonist shared with Locke and other Enlightenment writers an understanding of the ways in which the struggles for interests and power are conducted by linguistic means" (Eduardo Cadava, *Emerson and the Climates of History*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 48).

<sup>26</sup> However, Edwards' puritan version of the Enlightenment (or awakening) soon revealed its political goals insofar as the truth always remained in the hands of the ministers who were closest to God so that "freely" manifesting one's own will became free submission to the will of a minister and everybody who willfully accepted (ministerial) truth was con-

sidered to be living in the truth. The others, the “turbulent” ones, needed to be “adjusted”; that is, they needed to be exposed to the additional labor of “rational” argumentation so that in the end they could “freely” confess their sins and through confession unite themselves to their ministers. Edwards’ enlightened technique of disciplining was already successfully employed (at least according to his description) in his own New England town: “As to the nature of persons’ experiences, and the influences of that spirit that there is amongst us, persons when seized with concern are brought to forsake their vices, and ill practices; the looser sort are brought to forsake and to dread their former extravagances. . . . I believe there never was so much done at confessing of faults to each other, and making up differences, as there has lately been. Where this concern comes it immediately puts an end to differences between ministers and people: there was a considerable uneasiness at New Hadley between some of the people and their minister, but when this concern came amongst them it immediately put an end to it, and *the people are now universally united to their minister*. There was an exceeding alienation at Sunderland, between the minister and many of the people; but when this concern came amongst them it all vanished at once, and the people are universally united in hearty affection to their minister. There were some men at Deerfield, of turbulent spirits, that kept up an uneasiness there with Mr. Ashley; but one of the chief of them has lately been influenced fully and freely to confess his fault to him [to the minister] and is to become his hearty friend.” (Jonathan Edwards, Letter to Rev. Dr. Benjamin Colman, May 30, 1735 [The Great Awakening], *Norton Anthology*, p. 493.) Thus Edwards’ idea of the great idyll emerges: there will be no extravagances, no turbulent minds, no alienation of the people from their ministers.

<sup>27</sup> Edwards, *The Freedom*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p.69.

<sup>31</sup> In his earliest “work,” a letter probably addressed to Judge Paul Dudley and written while he was still a student at Yale College, Edwards ventures an explanation of the strange phenomenon of “flying spiders.” What at first seemed an inexplicable event (“But that which is most astonishing is that very often there appears at the end of these webs, spiders sailing in the air with them, doubtless with abundance of pleasure”) is interpreted through Cartesian geometry (and translation of Berkeley’s explanation of the moon’s diameter to the problem of flying spiders): “When a spider would go from one tree or branch to another, or would recreate himself by sailing or floating in the air, he first lets himself down a little way from the twig he stands on by a web, as [in] Fig. 1; and then taking hold of it by his forefeet as in Fig. 2, and then separates or loosens the part of the web *cd* from the part *bc* by which he hangs” (Jonathan Edwards, “The Spider Letter,” in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*. Ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout and Kenneth P. Minkema, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, p. 2). Thus what seemed an event, the possibility of flying without wings, becomes a web of connected steps, from *d* to *cd* to *bc* and so on, a movement based on a “certain connection.” The possibility of “pure flying” is thus translated into walking along geometrical paths.

<sup>32</sup> Edwards, *The Freedom*, p. 83.

<sup>33</sup> Melville, *Bartleby*, p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23. To avoid misunderstanding, one should here insist on the fact that Melville's criticism of Edwards (or the way he has the attorney formulate such a criticism) is not based on the gap between words and things, which would then result in an unbridgeable gap between "theory" and "practice." In other words the thesis is not advanced that words necessarily fail to do things, that theory is not practice. Melville appears here as a far more subtle philosopher. For the objection to Edwards that he has the attorney formulate, is that a theory that develops a formal argument about the absolute performative (a non-failure of the performative) does not have to have any performative force whatsoever, and that the performative can therefore fail, that no such thing as an absolutely successful performative exists. The difference between theory and practice, as formulated by the attorney, appears then as the difference between non-performative, strictly formal or logical reasoning, and any other theoretical reasoning that has performative power (such a theory would have to be defined as practice). "Pure" theory is thus a reasoning based on strictly formal argumentation in which the "first" assumption assumes the position of an axiom that cannot be proven.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24. Emerson advanced the same objection to Edwards in his Journal entry from January 22, 1834: "Luther and Napoleon are better treatises on the Will than Edwards's. Will does not know if it be cold or hot or dangerous, he only goes on to his mark, and leaves to mathematicians to calculate whether a body can come to its place without passing through all the intermediates" (*Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Ed. by Edwards Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, Vol. III, 1833-1835, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910, 251-2). Like Melville, Emerson here objects to the purely "logical" idea of the performative, which is, as he is suggesting, a contradiction in terms, for a performative that can be calculated by mathematicians precisely fails to be a performative. Even though I cannot elaborate my thesis fully (as it is not the goal of my project here) I nevertheless want to suggest that in contrast to what is commonly supposed (most clearly in Charles Feidelson's thesis of the continuity of American thinking, "one continuous movement from the Puritan era through the new learning of Locke to the new philosophy of Emerson" (Charles Feidelson, *Symbolism and American Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953, p. 108)), both Melville and Emerson are in radical opposition to Edwards' philosophy.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Irving Howe, *The American Newness: Culture and Politics in the Age of Emerson*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Priestley, *The Doctrine of Philosophical necessity Illustrated*. Garland Publishing, Inc., New York and London, 1976, p. 122.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124.

<sup>40</sup> Curiously enough in the already quoted letter to Benjamin Colman, Edwards notes that instead of being "enlivened" and "newly born" thanks to his theory, some of those who adopted it gave up all activity: "They seem to be brought to abhor themselves for the sins of their past life, and to long to be holy, and to live holily, and to God's glory; but at the same time complain that they can do nothing, [for] they are poor impotent creatures, utterly insufficient to glorify their Creator and Redeemer." (Edwards, Letter to Rev. Pr. B. Colman,



p. 494.) Those impotent creatures therefore unmistakably recognized in Edwards' "public theology" what was elaborated in his philosophy, namely that if all their actions are already decided upon and if their will will necessarily perform them, then there is no way out of their sins, for they are doomed to willfully commit them. The only way out, then, was the way of the impersonal (however, substantially different from Emerson's impersonal), of giving up all activity, of becoming involuntary passive beings unable to do anything. In other words they unmistakably recognized that once the connection of certainty is turned into the connection of necessity the will becomes an automatic, mechanical performance of that necessity. (For that reason, also, any reading of Edwards that does not want to recognize the immanent connection between his "public theology" and his "philosophy" fails). Edwards, however, does not seem overly troubled by those symptoms of passivity; he remains the man of assumptions. He reads their passivity as their being overwhelmed by the love for Jesus that, under the influence of their minister, could be transformed into a "greater respect to ministers:" "This town never was so full of love, nor so full of joy... Some persons have had those longing desires after Jesus Christ, that have been to that degree as to take away their strength, and very much to weaken them, and make them faint. Many have been even overcome with a sense of the dying love of Christ, so that the home of the body has been ready to fail under it; there was once three pious young persons in this town talking together of the dying love of Christ, till they all fainted away ... But no part of public worship has commonly [had] such an effect on them as singing God's praises. They have a greater respect to ministers than they used to have; there is scarcely a minister preaches here but gets their esteem and affection" (ibid.). In *Pierre*, Isabel makes a curious reference to certain "passive mortals" which repeats almost to a word Edwards' report (with clear reference to the fixed causal connection between things). She refers to those who were brought into a strange and unidentifiable house as those who were obsessed by Hell, Eternity and God and, who, in fear of committing a sin, became utterly passive. They could not be convinced by any rational argumentation to resume their everyday activities (the performative force of such a persuasion failed) because, as they argued, any argument that is formally coherent has the same truth value as any other and therefore cannot be accepted as "the truth" that would finally bring them back to labor and activity: "Some were always talking about Hell, Eternity, and God; and some of *all things as fixedly decreed*; others would say nay to this and then they would argue, but without much conviction either way. But once nearly all the people present – even dumb moping people, and the sluggish persons crouching in the corners – nearly all of them laughed once, when after a whole day's loud babbling, two of these predestinarian opponents, said each to the other – 'Thou hast convinced me, friend; but we are quits; for so also, have I convinced thee, the other way; now then, let's argue it all over again; for still, though mutually converted, we are still at odds.'" (Melville, *Pierre or The Ambiguities*. The Writings of Herman Melville, The Northwestern-Newberry Edition, Vol. VII, Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971, p. 121.)

<sup>41</sup> Edwards, *The Freedom*, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>43</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Bartleby; or, the Formula," p. 73.

<sup>44</sup> J. Hillis Miller, "Who Is He? Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," in *Versions of Pygmalion*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 146.

<sup>45</sup> Joseph Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1976, p. 157.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 157.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 157-158.

<sup>48</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "Bartleby, or On Contingency," in *Potentialities*. Ed. and Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 254.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 258-259. For the ascetic tradition and Bartleby's asceticism see H. Bruce Franklin, "The Ascetic's Advent," in *The Wake of Gods: Melville's Mythology*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963. From his analysis of asceticism Franklin develops a thesis, that I am not going to follow here, according to which it is possible to read Bartleby as the incarnation of Christ himself. "But the story repeatedly suggests that Bartleby may not be merely the least of Christ's brethren but may in fact be the saviour himself. Again I wish to emphasize that we are certainly not justified in simply taking Bartleby to be an incarnation or reincarnation of Christ (except in the terms of Mathew 25). But if we do not entertain the possibility that Bartleby is Christ, although we still see most of the tragedy, we miss a great deal of the comedy."

<sup>50</sup> Agamben, "Bartleby, or On Contingency," p. 259.

<sup>51</sup> Melville, *Bartleby*, p. 23.

<sup>52</sup> Peggy Kamuf, "Melville's Credit Card," in *The Division of Literature or the University in Deconstruction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 172.

<sup>53</sup> Paul de Man, "Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion," in *Aesthetic Ideology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 51.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p. 51.

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