

# **Blanka Maderova: Self, Speech and Agency: Emerson, Melville and Bartleby beyond Pragmatism and Performativity**

## **Abstract**

The dissertation focuses on Melville's characters - such as Bartleby the Scrivener - who challenge American Emersonian vitalism, rhetoricism and performativity. Melville's silence, deactivation, ruptures in discourse, and subjectivities have stood, even in his time, in contrast to American myths of success, force of will, and self-reliance. The potentialities of Melvillean "anti-heroes" contest the rhetorical force, performance, and unity of the isolated self represented in these myths. While Emerson's early work manifests his reliance on the powers of the "beyond" (Platonism) and the "below" (Gnosis), which, however, often cannot be clearly distinguished, the language of Emerson's late work resonates with that of the late Melville on many levels. The dynamic relationship between Emerson and Melville has been, in my view, shaping American culture since the "Melville Revival" in 1920s and continues to do so in contemporary debates regarding both the formation of subjectivity and issues of performativity and agency. Although Emerson is often portrayed as "the beautiful enemy" of Melville, it can be shown that they address the same topics - especially the issues of power, speech, will, silence, protest against paternal authority - while emphasizing potentiality.

Recently, there has emerged an intensified interest concerning the character of Bartleby. As I claim, Bartleby might, in contrast to the American ideology of self-creation and practical power, provide an instance of a performative "showing" or "acting" by means of *disappearing*. The contemporary interest in "the Bartleby question" is connected with the issues of agency, potentiality, law, and difference (as shown in C. S. Pierce, J. Derrida and G. Deleuze), as well as with a major protest against the way in which personal identity is performatively constituted by means of speech (as seen in Emerson's late work, the school of pragmatism, and theories of performativity). Yet, Bartleby is not immobile and inactive in all respects. I argue that Bartleby does something, both linguistically - within the realm of language, signs, performative constructions (where his formula "I would prefer not to" has profound effects) - and nonlinguistically (by means of his silence, leaving, presence, death). Both Bartleby and Emerson's poet manifest, in their selfless constitutions certain vacancy, blankness, singularity, and power

as potentiality. *Bartleby* shows the limits of rhetoric (while questioning the Platonic distinctions from the *Gorgias* between *nomos* and *physis*, between the self disappearing in *religious-mythical forces*, and the self led by the forces of *will to power*) and the American rhetorical tradition, including Austin's theory of performativity, James' pragmatist self, and Emerson's eloquent voice, notions of the will, power, potentiality, and agency. The *methods* that I use to argue these points involve close-reading, plus performative and critical theories.

In the first part of this work, then, the genealogy of the American self as opposed to the European notion of the subject is briefly sketched. Secondly, the self, its agency, and *Bartleby* as the detached self are interpreted from the perspective of Emerson's early work ("Circles," "Self-Reliance," and mainly his "Transcendentalist"- a probable source of Melville's "*Bartleby*"). Here, the spiritual (Platonic and Gnostic) level of Emerson's thought is explored. Following the Platonic distinction from the *Gorgias* regarding two kinds of forces constituting subjectivity (the religious-mythical forces and the enlightenment forces of will and power), the spiritual ascension and diving of the self are examined. The performative force of Emerson's words aims here to enable the transformation, unblocking and even complete abandonment of the self.

In the second part, the main topics are the power of rhetoric, performativity, repetition and presence (interpreted with the help of J. L. Austin and Gilles Deleuze) in Melville's "*Bartleby*." The power and consequences of *Bartleby*'s formula "I would prefer not to" are discussed, together with the issues of detachment from the body, originality, and sacrifice. Both Melville's *Bartleby* and Emerson's poet speak a foreign, *minoritarian* language within the language of the majority, which may reveal new possibilities and/or positions for personal identity/self.

In the third part, the self, its will, speech, and power are analyzed from the perspective of Emerson's late work, that is, from the perspective of immanence, which was, to a certain extent, later developed by Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Deleuze, Butler, and others. However, Emerson's and Melville's notions of power and will are interpreted *neither* in the Nietzschean lineage *nor* according to the essentialist interpretations of the resistant will of *Bartleby* (John B. Williams in *White Fire: The Influence of Emerson on Melville*) but from a perspective which goes beyond pragmatism and speech-act theory. Apart from the issues of confidence and forgery in Melville's "*Bartleby, the Scrivener*" and *The Confidence-man*, rhetoric, potentiality, silence, abyss, death, and the power of the self are examined in relation to poetic creation, gnosis, and the semiotics of expressive symbols (Charles Sanders Peirce).

Finally, the notions of the law and agency in Melville's "*Bartleby*" are contrasted with their use in

Kafka's "Before the Law." The exploration of Kafka's performative "Not Yet" and Melville's "I would prefer not to," together with an analysis of deferred action, order-words, paternal function, and pragmatic aspects in both works, should bring us to the point where we see the necessity to revise Austin's performative theories.

What is then analyzed in the last part of the dissertation is the nonlinguistic aspect of Bartleby's "performance." Language is presented as fluid, superlinear. I draw on Gilles Deleuze who claims in *A Thousand Plateaus* that linguistic and nonlinguistic elements are inseparable in enunciation from the very start. Pragmatics, which deals with the nonlinguistic, should be, according to Deleuze, considered a part of linguistics, and the most constitutive one. Deleuze thus opposes Noam Chomsky's language machine, which retains the tree-like model and linear ordering of linguistic elements in sentences and sentence combinations and which excludes the nonlinguistic. Instead, Deleuze introduces superlinearity, thinking about language without any fixed linear order; he talks about variables of content and expression instead of "constants." The abstract machine of language, in Deleuze's view, belongs not to a deep syntactical structure (as Chomsky would have it) but to *assemblage* which is not language-based but diagrammatic and superlinear. To think about Bartleby in Deleuzian terms provokes one to adopt a different view of the body and language as such. As to content, Bartleby's body is a screen, it lacks content. Yet, Bartleby shifts the bodily contours (at least of his body, and the fleeing body of the attorney) and turns them into fluid limitless forces. As to expression, Bartleby's linguistic signs also, like those of Emerson, make language plastic, fluid, boundless.

Contemporary poststructuralist thinkers such as Judith Butler or Gilles Deleuze (following Emerson, Nietzsche, Spinoza) are often criticized for their theories of subjectivity which focus too much on identity as a process, as an effect of various forces, and not on stable responsible agents. Gilles Deleuze actually attempts to think non-identity and shows various aspects of repetition in speech and images. I argue that both Deleuze and Butler are, however, still somehow preoccupied by the power of speech/discourse and its importance for self/identity, which was significantly developed, if not introduced, by the late Emerson and Nietzsche. That is why Melville's characters – such as Bartleby – are explored and seen as "Drummond lights" which illuminate everything around them, offering a different way of thinking about the self and language. For such characters test the limits of the notions of identity/consciousness as performatively constructed through speech, of the self as an inoperative power, as "different," or as a detached enigma, all of which are at the center of contemporary discourse on subjectivity. If Emerson is one of the greatest vitalists in American culture, Melville shows the

implications and significance of inactivity, gaps and ruptures for personal identity.

What we witness in Bartleby's case is a strange kind of spiritual and bodily detachment. It seems as if his main wish were to leave/escape the symbolic order of language and social practices altogether. Yet, Bartleby does influence language a lot even though his performative power is not based on language exclusively. As for Emerson and his possible response to the Bartlebian challenge, it is important to realize that Emerson's self does not relate only to the "beyond," to the Over-soul, Power, but also to the "below," to the abyss, to the potential, indeterminate zone/depth which transcends one both because of its place (limitless space of potentiality) and its time (before time and language, before Creation). As to his early work, it is only from the pre-linguistic "below," I believe, that Emerson could account for Bartleby. The beyond and the below refer to the respective Emersonian activities, that of ascension and diving. It is the act of diving with which Melville identifies.

Another aim of the dissertation, apart from analysis of the Bartlebian challenge to performativity, vitalism, and pragmatism, is to redefine the Emersonian self which was traditionally (but not by Emerson himself) seen as all-composed, willful, appropriative, and self-reliant. Instead, the view of subjectivity which stresses transition, power as potentiality, flux and metamorphosis is explored in both Emerson and Melville. Similarly to the selfless Bartlebian constitution, Emerson's poet is ready to abandon any category, norm, relationship, position, or political ideology. Such a radical move-away, disappearing from the pre-defined tracks every time the self feels too much confinement, is a sign of originality. It resonates with poststructuralism (Culler, Butler, Deleuze) and its never-ending process of difference, deferral; but it still relates to the drawing on the potential forces of one's nature, bringing them into language and law-giving. The process of bringing ideas and affects to light, to reflection, requires a pre-reflective perceptiveness/receptivity/affectivity of the mind and body. It is the light of intuition which enables the transfer from the subliminal to the conscious and personal realm of the self. Such drawing of images out of the darkness of the abyss corresponds to what we have mentioned before about Emerson's activity of diving.

As I argue, the bringing of ideas into light is not based on will. Bartleby is the Drummond light, functioning as a carriage, as Intuition. Emerson's poet, like Bartleby, never knows what will occur when a performative formula is pronounced. It often transcends the realm of traditional linguistics. While Emerson's poetry ends in music, Bartleby's "expression" ends in silence. What they both share is the sense of the value of the indeterminacy, the unpredictability, of potentiality, of what might result from any action, or from any inaction. This, in a sense, vindicates and creates the *space* for freedom, for the

possibility of contrafactuality, for hope. For both, the most important capability is first of all to make space for the non-articulated sense, for the body. In other words, one needs to stop talking, asking, trying to contact the other. After a long silence one can simply start to speak. We are used to the constant projecting of ourselves when we are thrown into situations, that is, we supplant our already actualized interpretations with new interpretations of the world, with ideas, concepts, maps of how things should occur and what they should mean. It is therefore necessary to de-focus our vision sometimes, to deactivate our desire, the laws and analytical thinking and simply be/experiment/play. For, the (Bartlebian) body-world can act only when it has some space for its action. It comes into being only in the moment when the space for its emergence is created; it comes into being together with its place. Only then can one *create*, in an Emersonian or Melvillean way, instead of mere translating, or moving along the sphere of symbols. It is possible to live from these elemental forces, be it in the affirmative, joyful mode, or the de-activated/deactivating one.

As to Austinian performativity, it is shown that the force of Bartleby's performative does not depend on any ceremonious circumstances, position of authority, sincerity, or iteration of a longtime-existing powerful formula. What affects the attorney and others is first of all Bartleby's strangely inhuman silent presence which suggests a possible leaving, a destitution. That is an important context of Bartleby's formula which constitutes the logic of preference. One of the reasons why it is so contagious could be the subconscious desire of his colleagues for independence, freedom from the law and the binding schemes of language and logic of assumptions. This unsaid, underground preference for a possible preference could add to the force of the formula and its infectious nature. Yet, Bartleby does not represent anyone; he may not be aware of the effect of the formula at all. For, if he were, that would suggest that there was a *decision* coming from his self as opposed to others. As we have shown, however, Bartleby's constitutions are selfless and indeterminate. Any definitions of the self as a separate subject – as an autonomous resolute individual – or any delimitations of the subject through the relationships with another not-Me in the social network are determinations based on mistrust toward oneself.

Power as potentiality, as I try to show, expresses itself in experimenting, in play, in selfless constitutions. Emerson's experimenting ends in music. Music and poetry, for Emerson, connect us to the pre-linguistic forces; they are expressions of playfulness for adults. Such joyful, selfless thinking abandoning all fixity stands in contrast to power as an attempt at fulfillment of a lack, of deficit, often through domination of others. The negative side of this philosophy idealizing the unified, well-formed self is frustration, anger, despair. Lack of form, lack of willfulness and selfhood is a problem for this

approach to the world. We have seen that Bartleby tested (deferred) both of these approaches. He himself was the process of pure difference, embodying the deferral of both action and meaning. Such deferral is typical of poststructuralism (Derrida). We pass from one signifier to another ad infinitum. There is no transcendental signifier or signified, no stable identity or meaning one could hold on to. That sounds like another philosophy leading to frustration.

As I argue in the thesis, power as potentiality can be effectuated in the affirmative way as well. Selfless constitutions are possible and do not have to lead to frustration. It does not matter if we do not arrive at definitive answers or transcendental signifiers. The rhetorical nature of our becoming, the obsession with language, can be transcended, transgressed. In experimenting, in playing, in music, one attunes oneself to the elemental forces. In that way, "elemental forces" and laws of convention can come into contact. In creative experimenting, one lets the body attune itself to the non-linguistic forces, bridging the soul-body split, getting new ideas and affects while changing the contours of the majoritarian approach to the world.

An extreme interpretation, which I do not support in the dissertation, would presuppose that Bartleby knows that the repetition of the performative will prevent him from writing, working, eating and lead to death eventually. He knows that it shatters the possibility of communication, of sharing, of humaneness (which is based on sharing). Such a decision, based on the will to nothingness, would manifest a resolute self. His disappearing, in this interpretation, would then be effectuated as a series of conscious steps outside of the symbolic order, away from identity, language, and from life.

What I try to argue instead is that both Emerson's poet and Melville's Bartleby embody power as potentiality, potentiality of transformation or deformation of the majoritarian discourse. In this interpretation, the force of Bartleby's performative shows the difference of idioms, where one cannot be translated to the other. Bartleby's experience (be it a past experience, for instance a trauma, or current experiencing of the world) cannot be articulated within the idiom of the attorney. His life or death is not something that could be argued about, agreed upon, or solved within the discourse of the attorney. Yet, the effects of Bartleby's formula do reach the conventional language and provoke movements from the center to the periphery, from majority to minority. As Deleuze suggests, the lines of escape can be creative or evasive (moving into the imaginary, "beyond" or "below"). As we have shown, however, Deleuze still works within language, using dialectical oppositions, even though he, like Emerson, tries to make language fluid and transform its order-words into pass-words. Although he extends the domain of

pragmatics, he cannot fully account for Bartleby whose performative presence and silence transcend the realm of rhetoric, showing us that there is much we can do and understand thanks to language, and much that we cannot.