

FACULTY OF ARTS
OF CHARLES UNIVERSITY
IN PRAGUE



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

27 May 2011

To the Dissertation Defense Committee of Blanka Maderová:
Arts Faculty
Charles University-Prague

I have now read the doctoral thesis by Blanka Maderová entitled

"Self, Speech and Agency: Emerson, Melville and Bartleby—Beyond Pragmatism and Performativity" (2011).

Let me begin by indicating that this reader found this thesis a weighty one and fully deserving the title of Ph.D.

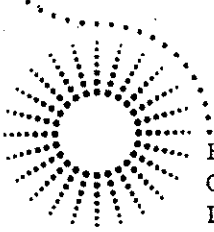
The present dissertation contains five parts across some 143 pp. (*single spaced*) as well as a substantial bibliography of 18 pp. followed by abstracts in Czech and in English.

The principal five parts are entitled as follows:

- 1) Introduction
- 2) Bartleby, Action, Discourse
- 3) Emerson's Late Work: Towards Deconstruction and Pragmatism
- 4) The Self, Law and Agency: Emerson, Melville and Kafka
- 5) Conclusion

Ms. Maderová begins with a fine array of understandings on Ralph Waldo Emerson's place in the Euro-American heritage with regard to his project of the self as experimenter, among other inter-related topics.

The candidate displays a fine analytical mind throughout and is careful to point out early on in her exposition that "Bartleby and Emerson's poet manifest, in their selfless constitutions, power as potentiality" (7); in the second part she argues that, "Both Melville's Bartleby and Emerson's poet [...] speak a foreign, minoritarian language within the language of the majority, which shall reveal new possibilities and/or positions for personal identity/self" (7). Part three looks at these two aforementioned figures with regard to "rhetoric, potentiality, silence, abyss, death and the power of the self [...] in relation to poetic creation, gnosis, and the semiotics of expressive symbols (Charles Sanders Peirce)" (8). Part four pursues "the notions of the law and agency in Melville's 'Bartleby' [...] and] 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



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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" (8).

All in all, the references to Plato, to Descartes, to Deleuze, to Derrida et. al. are to the point and give the candidate extra conceptual resources for greater interpretive agency in researching her chosen objects of focus.

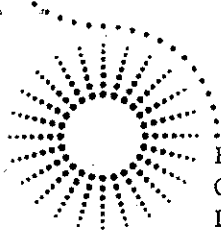
There are a few glitches in style that I would point up for the candidate's self-correction.

- 1) "the self as an inoperative power" (8) not "the self as a an inoperative power"
- 2) "considered highly" (10) not with the extra space "considered highly"
- 3) "and his description of" (10) not "and and"
- 4) p. 70 footnote 150 needs smaller case
- 5) "journey that counts" (101) not "journey what counts"
- 6) a quotation mark is "missing top of p. 104 referred as footnote 240"
- 7) "and a reactive one" (125) not "and reactive one"
- 8) "beyond" (126) not "beyong"
- 9) "Like the selfless" (126) not "Similarly to the selfless"
- 10) also some of the references need standardizing e.g. you say Stanford U press for one reference footnote 93 and yet Yale University Press for another; the principle of consistency could be a bit more apparent.

Otherwise, the thesis reads well and is composed in a good English.

Some key arguments and points to my mind include one controlling idea of the thesis again of "power as potentiality" (13), another concerning questions of, "How shall I live?" (13), and futher than this, "To experiment then means to question, to deconstruct, to free from non-functioning contexts, to revive or, if that is impossible, to create anew" (16); here I would ask the candidate to elaborate on her notion of the concept of newness, which in some quarters of the culture industry is attacked as an insufficiently grounded one (even though I am disinclined to agree myself,) it remains a problem for many professional researchers.

Further on, the tantalizing formulation is made that power for Emerson "resides in the moment of transition" (27); could the candidate make more explicit this remark in the context of the Bartleby-text? What of the cord of destiny in this context of attention?



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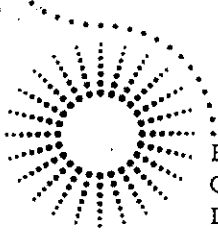
The narrative source-materials for the Bartleby-text for Melville are admirably covered on pp. 36-37 though the candidate does not discuss the idea of influence in any kind of theoretical way; would she correct that situation now in an oral response? Certainly it would be advisable in a longer book version of the manuscript.

The fascinating idea of "blankness" is broached on p. 38 for example which the candidate builds on in saying, "What Bartleby does is that he makes one abandon the 'I' of one's thinking so that one may plunge into indeterminacy and potentiality. That is obviously what frightens the attorney the most" (38). I would point to Maurice Blanchot's notion of 'absent meaning' (cf. the classic monograph in trans. as The Writing of the Disaster) as one place to expand the analysis in any future elaboration of the project into a book.

More: the candidate argues that "Bartleby's will is a mere organization of his becoming, of his potential. It is not a self-assertive will, which would also be power, the power to act otherwise. Bartleby's action is not direct, It occurs and affects us on the margins of our consciousness" (39). (Here Niklas Luhmann's systems theory would be pertinent for any future elaborations of this topic area into a tome.) But to return to the text under view, if the self is a creation, which some would argue is the recurrent subject of literature, how does this remark from the candidate fit into this model of understanding of Bartleby's individual will?

To be sure Ms. Maderová argues, "Like Emerson's poetic speech, Bartleby's creates confusion [...] Emerson's poet and Melville's Bartleby inhabit a zone of potentiality and indeterminacy which is extremely provocative and meaning-productive" (94). Here I wonder about the idea of the edge-structure and of its relevance as something given material agency by the aforementioned two chosen subjects: any comment? Also, when the candidate writes of Emerson, "A constant movement from the center to the periphery, from a centred self to moments when the self is decentralized is characteristic of Emerson's late work" (109) one considers how one could map that kind of formulation onto the Bartleby-phenomenon as a kind of peripheral or moral ethical dissidence, or other mode of reality? Would this involve (greater) self-confrontation or self-specification? Or: what else would it concern in a more detailed account?

A vital point emerges when the candidate submits: "Every new action in the world has law-giving aspect to it (as we have seen in Bartleby). It enacts new modes of subjectivity, a new hierarchy of values which may or may not be adopted by others. Emerson, however, suggests that the forces of such powerful personalities work as magnets and make others follow" (111). Could the candidate please discuss this idea in



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the context of Deleuze's time-image or in terms of the concept of becoming in Deleuze elsewhere in his corpus of texts or in other philosophers such as Hegel? What of the problem, for example, of any "programmatically modeling of truth"?

Moreover, as the argument develops in the thesis the candidate submits of Bartleby's hollow and yet strangely fertile in effect answer "I would prefer not to", "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." (141) Here it is obvious that forays into psychoanalysis would help one discuss the problem of the unconscious and of the desire of the other and so on and so forth. The unconscious as that which operationalizes things so to say may be seen as a refinement here of the problematic and not only as a by-issue.

The idea of "selfless constitutions" (142) such as Bartleby's constituting true power also taps into many philosophical questions about the collective nature of being, for example. Would the candidate have anything more to say on this topic? She continues, "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" (142). The super-criterion of freedom might also here be taken into the frame; consequently, what would constitute the free subject in the subject process? Would that be a motivation for innovation, such as true liberty?

Ms. Maderová begins her last paragraph thus: "What I have tried to argue [...] was that both Emerson's poet and Melville's Bartleby embodied 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 [...] cannot be articulated within the idiom of the attorney" (142-43). This effectively rounds off the basic argument of the work in question by striking up the idea that each concrete idiom is different (each concrete case is singular); does it follow therefore that we perhaps do not yet have adequate models for a proper cognition of the Bartleby-phenomenon and effect, or for releasing the spring of a more true identity via the value of performances? Be that as it may, this thesis makes valuable inroads on the shifting sands of precisely this aforementioned vitalizing subject, and in so doing makes a dent in the complicated veneer of the conceptual intersection between its thematic concerns in its works questioned.

For the rest, I repeat my initial remark that the present university dissertation



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constitutes a substantial and perceptive piece of intellectual work that merits the degree of Ph.D. My dissenting criticisms are meant to provoke further thinking along the relevant avenues of research for the possibility of expanding this textual project into a book length monograph.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to read this dissertation.

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