POTENTIALITIES

Collected Essays in Philosophy

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Edited and Translated
With an Introduction
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Stanford
University
Press

Stanford
California
1999

§ 15 Bartleby, or On Contingency (1993)

> At the same time that he created his throne, God created a writing table so big that a man could walk on it for a thousand years. The table was made of the whitest pearl; its extremities were made of rubies, and its center was made of emerald. Everything that was written on it was of the purest light. God looked upon this table a hundred times a day, and every time he looked upon it he constructed and destroyed, creating and killing. . . . At the same time that he created this table, God also created a pen of light, which was so long and wide that a man could run along either its length or its width for five hundred years. After having created his pen, God ordered it to write. "What shall I write?," said the pen. "You will write my wisdom and all my creatures," God answered, "from the world's beginning to its end."
>
> —*The Book of the Ladder*, chapter 20

The Scribe, or On Creation

As a scrivener, Bartleby belongs to a literary constellation. Its polar star is Akaky Akakievich ("for him, the whole world was in some sense contained in his copies . . . he had his favorite letters, and when he got to them he truly lost his wits"); its center is formed by the twin stars, Bouvard and Pécuchet ("the good idea that both secretly nourished—copying"); and its other extremity is lit by the white lights of Simon Tanner ("I am a scribe" is the only identity he claims for himself) and Prince Myshkin, who can effortlessly reproduce any handwriting. A little further on lies the asteroid belt of Kafka's courtroom clerks. But Bartleby also belongs to a philosophical constellation, and it may be that it alone contains the figure merely traced by the literary constellation to which Bartleby belongs.

1. The late Byzantine lexicon that goes under the name of *Suda* contains the following definition in the entry "Aristotle": *Aristotelēs tēs physeōs grammateus ēn ton kalamon apobrekhōn eis noun*, "Aristotle was the scribe of nature who dipped his pen in thought." In the "Notes" to his translation of Sophocles, Hölderlin cites this passage for no apparent reason, subverting it by means of a minimal correction. Aristotle, he says, was the scribe of nature who dipped his benevolent pen (*eunoun* instead of *eis noun*). Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* records a different version of the

same phrase, which originates in Cassiodorus: *Aristoteles, quando perihermeneias scriptebat, calamum in mente tingebat*, "When he wrote *De interpretatione*," one of the fundamental logical works of the *Organon*, "Aristotle dipped his pen in thought." In each case, what is decisive is not so much the image of the scribe of nature (which is also to be found in Atticus) as the fact that *nous*, thought or mind, is compared to an ink pot in which the philosopher dips his pen. The ink, the drop of darkness with which the pen writes, is thought itself.

What is the origin of this definition, which presents the fundamental figure of the philosophical tradition in the humble garb of a scribe, likening thought to an act of writing, albeit of a special kind? There is only one text in the entire Aristotelian *corpus* that contains a similar image, which may have furnished Cassiodorus or an unknown writer with the basis for his metaphor. This passage belongs not to the logical *Organon* but to Aristotle's treatise on the soul. It is the passage in book 3, in which Aristotle compares *nous*, the intellect or potential thought, to a writing tablet on which nothing is written: "the *nous* is like a writing tablet [*grammateion*]," we read, "on which nothing is actually written" (*De anima*, 430 a 1).

In Greece in the fourth century B.C., ink and papyrus were not the only means of writing. It was much more common, especially for private use, to write by engraving a stylus in a writing tablet covered with a thin layer of wax. Having reached a crucial point in his treatise, the point at which he considers the nature of the potential intellect and the mode of its passage to the act of intellection, Aristotle refers to an object of this kind, which was probably the very same writing tablet on which he was recording his thoughts at that moment. Much later, once writing with pen and ink had become the dominant practice and Aristotle's image risked appearing antiquated, someone modernized it in the sense later recorded by *Suda*.

2. The image had great fortune in the tradition of Western philosophy. The Latin translator who rendered *grammateion* by *tabula rasa* consigned it to a history that led to Locke's "white sheet" ("let us suppose that, in the beginning, the mind is what is called a white sheet, without any characters, without any 'ideas'"), and also to the incongruous expression, which still exists in Italian, of "making a clean sweep" (*far tabula rasa*). The image was ambiguous, and this ambiguity certainly contributed to

its success. Alexander of Aphrodisius noted that the philosopher should have spoken not of a *grammateion* but, more precisely, of its *epitedeiotes*, that is, the light layer of wax covering it, on which the stylus inscribes letters (in the terms of the Latin translators, not a *tabula rasa* but a *rasura tabulae*). The observation, which Alexander had special reasons to insist on, was, however, exact. The difficulty that Aristotle seeks to avoid through the image of the writing tablet is that of the pure potentiality of thought and how it is possible to conceive of its passage to actuality. For, if thought in itself had a determinate form, if it were always already something (as a writing tablet is a thing), it would necessarily appear in the intelligible object and thus hinder intellection. This is why Aristotle takes care to specify that *nous* "has no other nature than that of being potential, and before thinking it is absolutely nothing" (*De anima*, 429 a 21–22).

The mind is therefore not a thing but a being of pure potentiality, and the image of the writing tablet on which nothing is written functions precisely to represent the mode in which pure potentiality exists. For Aristotle, all potential to be or to do something is always also potential not to be or not to do (*dynamis mē einai, mē energein*), without which potentiality would always already have passed into actuality and would be indistinguishable from it (according to the Megarians' thesis, which Aristotle explicitly refutes in Book Theta of the *Metaphysics*). The "potential not to" is the cardinal secret of the Aristotelian doctrine of potentiality, which transforms every potentiality in itself into an impotentiality (*tou autou kai kata to auto pasa dynamis adynamia*) (*Metaphysics*, 1046 a 32). Just as the architect retains his potential to build even when he does not actualize it and just as the kithara player is a kithara player because he can also not play the kithara, so thought exists as a potential to think and not to think, as a wax writing tablet on which nothing is written (the potential intellect of medieval philosophers). And just as the layer of sensitive wax is suddenly grazed by the scribe's stylus, so the potentiality of thought, which in itself is nothing, allows for the act of intelligence to take place.

3. In Messina, between 1280 and 1290, Abraham Abulafia composed the Cabalistic treatises that remained in European libraries in manuscript form for centuries and that were brought to the attention of nonspecialists only in the twentieth century (thanks to Gershom Scholem and

Moshe Idel). In these works, divine creation is conceived as an act of writing in which letters can be said to represent the material vehicle through which the creative word of God, which is likened to a scribe moving his pen, incarnates itself in created things:

> The secret at the origin of all creatures is the letter of the alphabet and every letter is a sign that refers to creation. Just as the scribe holds his pen in his hand and uses it to draw several drops of ink, picturing in his mind the form that he wants to give to matter, so similar acts are performed in the higher and lower realms of creation (in all these gestures, the scribe's hand is the living organ moving the inanimate pen used as an instrument to make ink flow onto the pergamen, which represents the body, the subject of matter and form). This can be understood by anyone with intelligence, for to say more is prohibited.

Abulafia was a reader of Aristotle and, like every cultured Jew of his age, was acquainted with the philosopher through Arabic translations and commentaries. The problem of the passive intellect and its relation to the active or poetic intellect (which Aristotle, in *De anima*, liquidates with a few enigmatic sentences) was treated with exceptional subtlety by the *falasifa* (as the disciples of Aristotle in Islam were called). The prince of the *falasifa* himself, Avicenna, conceived of the creation of the world as an act in which the divine intelligence thinks itself. The creation of the sublunary world (which, in the emanationist process that Avicenna had in mind, is the work of the last angel-intelligence, who is none other than Aristotle's agent intellect) was therefore also understood according to the model of thought thinking itself and in this way letting the multiplicity of creatures be. Every act of creation (as was well known by the thirteenth-century love poets, who transformed Avicenna's angels into ladies) is an act of intelligence; and inversely, every act of intelligence is an act of creation that lets something be. But precisely in *De anima*, Aristotle represented the potential intellect as a writing tablet on which nothing is written. As a consequence, in the marvelous treatise on the soul that the medievals knew as *Liber VI naturaliam*, Avicenna uses the image of writing to illustrate the various kinds or levels of the potential intellect. There is a potentiality (which he calls material) that resembles the condition of a child who may certainly one day learn to write but does not yet know anything about writing. Then there is a potentiality (which he calls possible) that belongs to the child who has begun to write with pen and ink and knows how to form the first letters. And there is, finally, a complete

or perfect potentiality that belongs to the scribe who is in full possession of the art of writing in the moment in which he does not write (*potentia scriptoris perfecti in arte sua, cum non scripserit*). Later, in the Arabic tradition, creation was thus likened to an act of writing; the agent or poetic intellect, which illuminates the passive intellect and allows it to pass into actuality, is therefore identified with an angel, whose name is "Pen" (*Qalam*).

When, in the holy city, the great Andalusian Sufi Ibn Arabi drew up a plan of the work to which he would devote his last years, *The Illuminations of Mecca*, it was therefore not an accident that he decided to dedicate its second chapter to the science of letters (*'ilm al-hurûf*), which concerned the hierarchical levels of vowels and consonants as well as their correspondences with the divine names. In the process of acquiring knowledge, the science of letters marks the transition from the inexpressible to the expressible; in the process of creation, it indicates the passage from potentiality to actuality. Ibn Arabi defines existence, pure Being, which for the Scholastics is simply ineffable, as "a letter of which you are the meaning." He graphically represents the passage of creation from potentiality to actuality as a *ductus* that ties the three letters *alif-lâm-mîm* together in a single gesture:

The first part of this grapheme, the letter *alif*

signifies the descent of potential Being toward the attribute. The second part, *lâm*

indicates the extension of the attribute toward actuality. And the third part, *mîm*

marks the descent of actuality toward manifestation.

Here, the equation of writing and the process of creation is absolute. The scribe who does not write (of whom Bartleby is the last, exhausted figure) is perfect potentiality, which a Nothing alone now separates from the act of creation.

4. Who moves the scribe's hand so that it will pass into the actuality of writing? According to what laws does the transition from the possible to the real take place? And if there is something like possibility or potentiality, what—in it or outside it—causes it to exist? In Islam, these questions constituted the subject of the rupture between the *motekallemim*, that is, the Sunnite theologians, and the *falasifa*. Fixing their gaze upon Aristotle's writing tablet, the *falasifa* inquired into the principles and laws by which the possible, which exists in the mind of God or the artificer, does or does not take place in the creative act. Against them, the Asharites, who represent the dominant current of Sunnite orthodoxy, hold an opinion that not only destroys the very concepts of cause, law, and principle but also invalidates all discourse on the possible and the necessary, thus undermining the very basis of the *falasifa*'s research. The Asharites conceive of the act of creation as an incessant and instantaneous production of miraculous accidents that cannot influence each other and that are, therefore, independent of all laws and causal relations. When the dyer soaks the white cloth in the indigo barrel or when the blacksmith hardens the blade in the fire, the dye does not penetrate the cloth to color it and the heat of the fire does not render the blade incandescent. Rather, it is God himself who establishes a coincidence, one that is habitual but in itself purely miraculous, by which color is produced in the cloth the moment it is immersed in the indigo barrel and incandescence appears in the blade every time it is placed in the fire.

> When the scribe moves his pen, it is thus not he who moves it; this movement is only an accident that God creates in the scribe's hand. God has established, as habit, that the movement of the hand coincides with that of the pen and that the movement of the pen coincides with the production of writing; but the hand has no causal influence whatsoever in the process, since an accident cannot act upon another accident. . . . For the movement of the pen, God thus created four accidents that do not in any way cause each other but merely coexist together. The first accident is my will to move my pen; the second is my potential to move it; the third is the very movement of my hand; the fourth, finally, is the movement of my pen. When man wants something and does it, this therefore means that, first, his will was created for him, then his faculty of acting, and, last of all, the action itself.

This is not simply a conception of the creative act that differs from the one offered by the philosophers. What the theologians want is to break Aristotle's writing tablet forever, to drive all experience of possibility from

the world. But no sooner is the problem of potentiality expelled from the domain of human beings than it reappears in God. This is why Ghazali, who as a brilliant professor in the *madrasa* of Baghdad had tenaciously maintained the position of the Asharites in a book called *The Self-Destruction of the Philosophers*, was forced to reckon once again with the figure of the scribe subsequently, during his wanderings from the mosque of the Rock in Jerusalem to the minarets of Damascus. In his *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, Ghazali thus composes an apologue on divine potentiality that begins as follows:

> A man enlightened by the light of God saw a sheet of paper dipped in black ink, and asked it, "How is it that you, who were once stunningly white, are now covered with black marks? Why did your face turn black?" "You are unjust with me," the sheet answered, "for I was not the one who blackened my face. Ask the ink, who for no reason moved out of the pot, to spill onto me." So the man turned to the ink, looking for explanations; but the ink answered by referring him to the pen, which had torn it from its tranquil dwelling place and exiled it onto the sheet of paper. When the man questioned the pen, the pen told him to turn to the hand who, after seizing it and cruelly breaking its tip, dipped it into the ink pot. The hand, who claimed to be nothing more than miserable flesh and bones, then suggested that the man turn to the Potentiality that moved it. But this Potentiality referred the man to the Will, and the Will referred him to Science, until, moving from cause to cause, the enlightened one finally reached the impenetrable veils of divine Potentiality, from which a terrible voice thundered, "One does not ask God for reasons for what he does; but reasons for your actions will be demanded."

Islamic fatalism (which is the origin of the darkest name for the concentration-camp inhabitant, the *Muselmann*) is thus grounded not in an attitude of resignation but, on the contrary, in a limpid faith in the incessant operation of divine miracles. Yet it is certain that in the world of the *motekallemim*, the category of possibility was wholly destroyed; human potentiality was groundless. There was only the inexplicable movement of the divine hand, which could not be foreseen and which the writing tablet had no reason to expect. In opposition to this absolute demodalization of the world, the *falasifa* remained faithful to Aristotle's legacy. In its deepest intention, philosophy is a firm assertion of potentiality, the construction of an experience of the possible as such. Not thought but the potential to think, not writing but the white sheet is what philosophy refuses at all costs to forget.

5. Potentiality, however, is the hardest thing to consider. For if potentiality were always only the potential to do or to be something, we would never experience it as such; it would exist only in the actuality in which it is realized, as the Megarians maintained. An experience of potentiality as such is possible only if potentiality is always also potential not to (do or think something), if the writing tablet is capable of not being written on. But precisely here everything becomes far more complicated. How is it possible to think a potential not to think? What does it mean for a potential not to think to pass into actuality? And if the nature of thought is to be potential, then what will it think?

In Book Lambda of the *Metaphysics* (1074 b 15–35), at the point where he discusses the divine mind, Aristotle confronts precisely these aporias:

> The question of thought implies certain aporias. For it seems to be the most divine of phenomena, but its mode of Being appears problematic. If thought thought nothing [if, that is, it kept to its potential not to think], why would it be venerable? It would be like a man who slept. And if thought actually thought something, it would be subordinate to this thing, since its Being would be not actuality but potentiality [it would be determined by something other than its own essence, which is to be potential]. And in either case, whether its nature is potential thought [*nous*] or actual thought [*noēsis*], what does it think? Either itself or something other than itself. If it thought something other than itself, it would either always think of the same thing or sometimes of one thing and sometimes of another. But does it make any difference whether it is thinking of that which is noble rather than something accidental? Would it not be absurd to be thinking of certain things? Clearly, then, it thinks that which is most divine, most honorable, and does not change. . . . And if thought were not thinking but a potential to think, it would follow that the continuity of its thinking would tire it. Moreover, it is clear that in this case, there would be something more honorable than thought, namely, the object of thought; indeed, thinking and actual thought belong even to that which thinks the worst objects. If this is to be avoided (for there are things which it is better not to see than to see), actual thought cannot be the best of things. Therefore thought thinks itself, if it is the most excellent of all things, and thought is the thinking of thinking.[1]

The aporia here is that the highest thought can neither think nothing nor think something, neither remain potential nor become actual, neither write nor not write. And it is to escape from this aporia that Aristotle formulates his famous idea of thought thinking itself, which is a kind of

mean between thinking nothing and thinking something, between potentiality and actuality. Thought that thinks itself neither thinks an object nor thinks nothing. It thinks a pure potentiality (to think and not to think); and what thinks its own potentiality is what is most divine and blessed.

But the aporia returns as soon as it is dissolved. What does it mean for a potential to think to think itself? How is it possible, in actuality, to think a pure potentiality? How can a writing tablet on which nothing is written turn back upon itself, *impress itself*?

Reflecting on the enigma of thought thinking itself and the *tabula rasa* in his commentary on *De anima*, Albert the Great pauses to consider precisely these questions. Albert declares himself to be "in complete agreement" with Averroes, who had given the greatest privilege to the potential intellect, making it into a single entity common to all human beings; yet Averroes had treated this decisive point quite hastily. Aristotle's statement that the intellect itself is intelligible could not be understood in the same sense in which one says that any object whatsoever is intelligible. The potential intellect is not a thing. It is nothing other than the *intentio* through which a thing is understood; it is not a known object but simply a pure knowability and receptivity (*pura receptibilitas*). Anticipating Wittgenstein's thesis on the impossibility of metalanguage, Albert sees clearly that to say that an intelligibility grasps itself cannot be to reify it by dividing it into a meta-intelligence and an object-intelligence. The writing of thought is not the writing of a foreign hand, which moves a stylus to graze the soft wax; rather, at the point at which the potentiality of thought turns back on itself and pure receptivity so to speak feels its own feeling, precisely then, Albert writes, it is as if the letters, on their own, wrote themselves on the writing tablet (*et hoc simile est, sicut si diceremus quod litterae scriberent seipsas in tabula*).

6. It is a commonplace that the three great monotheistic religions are in accord on the creation of the world from nothing. Christian theologians thus oppose creation, which is an *operari ex nihilo*, to the art of the artificer, which is instead always a *facere de materia*. An equally decisive argument is to be found in the polemic of the rabbis and the *motekallemim* against the view, which is attributed to the philosophers, that it is impossible for God to have created the world from nothing, since *nihil ex nihilo fit*. In each case, what is essential is the refutation of the very idea

that something such as matter (that is, potential Being) could preexist God. But what does it mean "to create from nothing"? As soon as one examines the problem closely, everything is complicated; more and more, the Nothing begins to resemble something, albeit something of a special kind.

Maimonides, who argued for the truth of creation from nothing in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, was nevertheless familiar with a passage of the authoritative midrash known as *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer* "that strongly shakes the faith of the theologian and the man of science" by suggesting the existence of something like a matter of creation. "Of what," one reads in this text, "were the heavens created? God took the light from his garments and spread it out like a sheet. Thus the heavens were made, as it is written: 'He wraps himself in light as in a garment, and spreads the heavens as a rug.'" Moreover, according to the Sufis the verse in the Koran in which God addresses the creature, saying "We created you when you were nothing (were a nonthing)," proved that this nonthing was not a pure Nothing, since God had already turned to the Nothing in the act of creation, saying "Be!"

The fact is that by the time Jewish, Islamic, and Christian theologians formulated the idea of creation from nothing, Neoplatonism had already conceived of its highest principle as a Nothing from which all things proceed. Just as the Neoplatonists had distinguished two Nothings, one that, so to speak, transcends beings from above and one that exceeds them from below, so they distinguished two matters, one corporeal and the other incorporeal, the dark and eternal background of intelligible beings. Cabalists and mystics brought this thesis to its limit and, with their characteristic radicality, clearly stated that the Nothing from which all creation proceeds is God himself. Divine Being (or rather hyper-Being) is the Nothing of beings, and only by, so to speak, sinking into this Nothing was God able to create the world. In his *De divisione naturae*, commenting on the verse "and the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep" (*terra autem erat inanis et vacua et tenebrae erant super faciem abyssi*), John Scotus Eriugena refers the biblical text to the primordial ideas or causes of beings that are eternally made in the mind of God. Only in descending into this darkness and this abyss did God create the world and, at the same time, himself (*descendens vero in principiis rerum ac velut se ipsam creans in aliquo inchoat esse*).

The problem that is at issue here is, in truth, that of the existence in God of possibility or potentiality. Since Aristotle stated that all potentiality is also potentiality not (to be or do), the theologians were forced to strip God of all potential to be and to will at the same time that they affirmed his omnipotence. If God had the potential to be, he could also not be, which would contradict his eternity. On the other hand, if God were capable of not wanting what he wants, he would be capable of wanting non-Being and evil, which is equivalent to introducing a principle of nihilism into God. The theologians thus conclude that, while he contains unlimited potentiality in himself, God is nevertheless bound to his will and cannot do or want anything other than what he has willed. God's will, like his Being, is absolutely without potentiality.

According to the mystics and Cabalists, by contrast, the obscure matter that creation presupposes is nothing other than divine potentiality. The act of creation is God's descent into an abyss that is simply his own potentiality and impotentiality, his capacity to and capacity not to. In David of Dinant's radical formulation, which was condemned as heretical in 1210, God, thought, and matter are thus one and the same, and this undifferentiated abyss is the Nothing from which the world proceeds and on which it eternally rests. In this context, "abyss" is not a metaphor. As Jakob Böhme clearly states, it is the life of darkness in God, the divine root of Hell in which the Nothing is eternally produced. Only when we succeed in sinking into this Tartarus and experiencing our own impotentiality do we become capable of creating, truly becoming poets. And the hardest thing in this experience is not the Nothing or its darkness, in which many nevertheless remain imprisoned; the hardest thing is being capable of annihilating this Nothing and letting something, from Nothing, be. "Praise is due to God," Ibn Arabi writes at the beginning of his *Illuminations*, "for He has made things exist from the Nothing, annihilating it."

The Formula, or On Potentiality

1. This is the philosophical constellation to which Bartleby the scrivener belongs. As a scribe who has stopped writing, Bartleby is the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives; and at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of this Noth-

ing as pure, absolute potentiality. The scrivener has become the writing tablet; he is now nothing other than his white sheet. It is not surprising, therefore, that he dwells so obstinately in the abyss of potentiality and does not seem to have the slightest intention of leaving it. Our ethical tradition has often sought to avoid the problem of potentiality by reducing it to the terms of will and necessity. Not what you *can* do, but what you *want* to do or *must* do is its dominant theme. This is what the man of the law repeats to Bartleby. When he 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).[2] When the man of the law honestly tries, in his own way, to understand the scrivener, the readings to which he dedicates himself leave no doubts as to the categories he intends to use: "'Edwards on the Will,' and 'Priestly on Necessity.'"[3] But potentiality is not will, and impotentiality is not necessity; despite the salutary impression that the books give him, the categories of the man of the law have no power over Bartleby. To believe that will has power over potentiality, that the passage to actuality is the result of a decision that puts an end to the ambiguity of potentiality (which is always potentiality to do and not to do)—this is the perpetual illusion of morality.

Medieval theologians distinguish between *potentia absoluta*, an "absolute potentiality" by which God can do anything (according to some, even evil, even acting such that the world never existed, or restoring a girl's lost virginity), and *potentia ordinata*, an "ordered potentiality," by which God can do only what is in accord with his will. Will is the principle that makes it possible to order the undifferentiated chaos of potentiality. If it is true that God could have lied, broken his oaths, incarnated himself in a woman or an animal instead of in the Son, he thus did not want to do so and he could not have wanted to do so; and a potentiality without will is altogether unrealizable and cannot pass into actuality.

Bartleby calls into question precisely this supremacy of the will over potentiality. If God (at least *de potentia ordinata*) is truly capable only of what he wants, Bartleby is capable only without wanting; he is capable only *de potentia absoluta*. But his potentiality is not, therefore, unrealized; it does not remain unactualized on account of a lack of will. On the contrary, it exceeds will (his own and that of others) at every point. Inverting Karl Valentin's witticism "I wanted to want it, but I didn't feel able to want it," one could say of Bartleby that he succeeds in being able (and not being able) absolutely without wanting it. Hence the irreducibility of his "I would prefer not to." It is not that he does not *want* to copy or that he does not *want* to leave the office; he simply would prefer not to. The formula that he so obstinately repeats destroys all possibility of constructing a relation between being able and willing, between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*. It is the formula of potentiality.

2. Gilles Deleuze has analyzed the particular structure of Bartleby's formula, likening it to expressions that linguists define as agrammatical, such as Cummings's "he danced his did" or "j'en ai un de pas assez." Deleuze argues that the destructive force of Bartleby's formula consists in its secret agrammaticality: "the formula 'disconnects' words and things, words and actions, but also speech acts and words—it severs language from all reference, in accordance with Bartleby's absolute vocation, *to be a man without references*, someone who appears suddenly and then disappears, without reference to himself or anything else."[4] Philippe Jaworski, for his part, has observed that Bartleby's formula is neither affirmative nor negative and that Bartleby neither accepts nor refuses, stepping forward and stepping backward at the same time. As Deleuze suggests, the formula thus opens a zone of indistinction between yes and no, the preferable and the nonpreferable. But also—in the context that interests us—between the potential to be (or do) and the potential not to be (or do). The final "to" that ends Bartleby's phrase has an anaphoric character, for it does not refer directly to a segment of reality but, rather, to a preceding term from which it draws its only meaning. But here it is as if this anaphora were absolutized to the point of losing all reference, now turning, so to speak, back toward the phrase itself—an absolute anaphora, spinning on itself, no longer referring either to a real object or to an anaphorized term: *I would prefer not to prefer not to*. . . .

What is the origin of this formula? Critics have cited one of Melville's letters to Hawthorne, in which he praises "no" over "yes" as a possible precursor to Bartleby's phrase ("For all men who say yes, lie; and all men who say no—why, they are in the happy condition of judicious, unencumbered travelers in Europe; they cross the frontiers into Eternity with

nothing but a carpetbag—that is to say, the Ego"). The reference could not be more out of place. Bartleby does not consent, but neither does he simply refuse to do what is asked of him; nothing is farther from him than the heroic pathos of negation. In the history of Western culture, there is only one formula that hovers so decidedly between affirmation and negation, acceptance and rejection, giving and taking. The formula, which is morphologically and semantically similar to the scrivener's litany, is recorded, among other places, in a text that was familiar to every cultured man of the nineteenth century: Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. We are referring to the expression *ou mallon*, "no more than," the technical term with which the Skeptics denoted their most characteristic experience: *epokhē*, suspension.

"The Skeptics," Diogenes writes in his life of Pyrrho, "use this expression neither positively [*thetikōs*] nor negatively [*anairetikōs*], as when they refute an argument by saying: 'Scylla exists no more than [*ou mallon*] a chimera.'"[5] The term, however, is nevertheless not to be understood as indicating a genuine comparison: "But the Skeptics refute even the 'no more than.' For just as providence exists no more than it does not exist, so the 'no more than' is no more than it is not." Sextus Empiricus reaffirms the self-referential status of *ou mallon* just as decisively: "Even as the proposition 'every discourse is false' says that it too, like all propositions, is false, so the formula 'no more than' says that it itself is no more than it is not. . . . And even if this expression appears as an affirmation or a negation, still this is not the sense in which we use it but rather an indifferent [*adiaforōs*] and illegitimate sense [*katakrēstikōs*]."

The way in which the scrivener makes use of his obstinate formula could not be characterized more precisely. But the analogy can also be followed up in another direction. In his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, having commented on the meaning of the expression *ou mallon*, Sextus adds: "the most important thing is that, in uttering this expression, the Skeptic says the phenomenon and announces the affect without any opinion [*apaggellei to pathos adoxastōs*]." Although it is not usually recorded as such, this last expression (*pathos apaggellein*) is also a technical term of the Skeptics' lexis. We find it once again, in the same sense, in another passage of Sextus's *Outlines*: "When we say 'everything is incomprehensible,' we do not mean to state that what the dogmatics seek is by nature incomprehensible; we limit ourselves to announcing the passion [or affect: *to heautou pathos apaggellontos*]."

Aggellō and *apaggellō* are verbs that express the function of the *aggelos*, the messenger, who simply carries a message without adding anything, or who performatively announces an event (*polemon apaggellein* means "to declare war"). The Skeptic does not simply oppose aphasia to *phasis*, silence to discourse; rather, he displaces language from the register of the proposition, which predicates something of something (*legein ti kata tinos*), to that of the announcement, which predicates nothing of nothing. Maintaining itself in the *epokhē* of the "no more than," language is transformed into the angel of the phenomenon, the pure announcement of its passion. As the adverb *adoxastōs* specifies, "passion" here indicates nothing subjective; *pathos* is purified of all *doxa*, all subjective appearance, and becomes the pure announcement of appearance, the intimation of Being without any predicate.

In this light, Bartleby's formula shows its full sense. It inscribes whomever utters it in the line of *aggeloi*, messengers. One of these messengers is Kafka's Barnaby, who, we read, "was perhaps simply a messenger, one who knew nothing of the content of the letters entrusted to him," one whose "gaze, smile, and walk seemed to be those of a messenger, although he himself was not aware of it." As a messenger, Bartleby was sent "for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence, which it was not for a simple mortal . . . to fathom."[6] But if the formula he repeats hovers so obstinately between acceptance and refusal, negation and position, if it predicates nothing and, in the end, even refutes itself, what is the message he has come to tell us, what does his formula announce?

3. "The Skeptics understand potentiality-possibility [*dynamis*] as any opposition between sensibles and intelligibles. By virtue of the equivalence found in the opposition between words and things, we thus reach the *epokhē*, the suspension, which is a condition in which we can neither posit nor negate, accept nor refuse." According to this striking text of Sextus, the Skeptics viewed suspension not simply as indifference but as an experience of possibility or potentiality. What shows itself on the threshold between Being and non-Being, between sensible and intelligible, between word and thing, is not the colorless abyss of the Nothing but the luminous spiral of the possible. To be able is *neither to posit nor to negate*. But in what way does what is-no-more-than-it-is-not still preserve in itself something like potentiality?

Leibniz once expressed the originary potentiality of Being in the form of a principle usually defined as the "principle of sufficient reason." This

principle has the following form: *ratio est cur aliquid sit potius quam non sit*, "there is a reason for which something does rather than does not exist." Insofar as it cannot be reduced either to the pole of Being or to the pole of the Nothing, Bartleby's formula (like its Skeptic archetype) calls into question the "strongest of all principles," appealing precisely to the *potius*, the "rather" that articulates its scansion. Forcibly tearing it from its context, the formula emancipates potentiality (*potius*, from *potis*, which means "more powerful") from both its connection to a "reason" (*ratio*) and its subordination to Being.

Commenting on the principle of sufficient reason, which his teacher Leibniz had left unproven, Christian Wolff explains that our reason is disgusted by the idea of something taking place without a reason. If one takes away this principle, he writes, "the true world becomes a fairy-tale world, in which the will of men takes the place of reasons for what happens" (*mundus verus abit in mundum fabulosum, in quo voluntas hominis stat pro ratione eorum, quae fiunt*). The *mundus fabulosus* at issue here is that of

> the absurd fairy tale told by old women and that, in our vernacular, is called *Schlarrafenland*, the Land of Plenty. . . . You would like a cherry—and, at your command, there appears a cherry tree full of ripe fruit. According to your wish, the fruit flies toward your mouth and, if you so will it, divides in half in mid air, letting the pit and the bad parts fall to the ground so that you do not have to spit them out. Pigeons roasted on a spit fall from the sky and spontaneously enter the mouths of whoever is hungry.

What is truly disgusting to the philosopher's eyes, however, is not that will and caprice take the place of reason in the domain of things but that *ratio* is thus also extinguished in the domain of will and potentiality. "Not only are there now no principles of possibility and no principles of actuality external to man; what is more, not even the will has a principle for its willing, but instead indifferently wills anything. Hence it does not even want what it desires [*ideo nimirum vult, quia libet*]; there is no reason for it to want one thing rather than another." It is not true, therefore, that once the principle of reason is removed, human will takes the place of *ratio*, transforming the true world into a fable. Precisely the contrary is true, namely, that once *ratio* is removed, the will is ruined together with it.

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 assure the supremacy of Being over Nothing but exist, without reason, in the indifference between Being and Nothing. The indifference of Being and Nothing is not, however, an equivalence between two opposite principles; rather, it is the mode of Being of potentiality that is purified of all reason. Leibniz did not allow the possible to have any autonomous "potential to make itself exist" (*puissance pour se faire exister*), which he argued was to be found outside the possible, in God, insofar as he is a necessary being, that is, "existentifying" (*Est ergo causa cur existentia praevaleat non-existentiae, seu ens necessarium est existentificans*). Now wholly subverted, the Leibnizian principle instead takes on the Bartleby-like form of the following statement: "the fact that there is no reason for something to exist rather than not to exist is the existence of something no more than nothing." In the place of the Prince of Denmark's *boutade*, which reduces every problem to the opposition between to be and not to be, Being and non-Being, the scrivener's formula suggests a third term that transcends both: the "rather" (or the "no more than"). This is the one lesson to which Bartleby always holds. And, as the man of the law seems to intuit at a certain point, the scrivener's trial is the most extreme trial a creature can undergo. For to hold to the Nothing, non-Being, is certainly difficult; but it is the characteristic experience of the ungrateful guest—nihilism—with whom we are all too familiar today. And to hold simply to Being and its necessary positivity is also difficult; but is this not precisely the sense of the complicated Western onto-theo-logical ceremony whose morality is in secret solidarity with the guest it would like to drive away? To be capable, in pure potentiality, to bear the "no more than" beyond Being and Nothing, fully experiencing the impotent possibility that exceeds both—this is the trial that Bartleby announces. The green screen that isolates his desk traces the borders of an experimental laboratory in which potentiality, three decades before Nietzsche and in a sense that is altogether different from his, frees itself of the principle of reason. Emancipating itself from Being and non-Being alike, potentiality thus creates its own ontology.

The Experiment, or On Decreation

1. In a work on Robert Walser, Walter Lüssi invented the concept of an experiment without truth, that is, an experience characterized by the dis-

appearance of all relation to truth. Walser's writing is "pure poetry" (*reine Dichtung*) because it "refuses, in the widest sense, to recognize the Being of something as something." This concept should be transformed into a paradigm for literary writing. Not only science but also poetry and thinking conduct experiments. These experiments do not simply concern the truth or falsity of hypotheses, the occurrence or nonoccurrence of something, as in scientific experiments; rather, they call into question Being itself, before or beyond its determination as true or false. These experiments are without truth, for truth is what is at issue in them.

When Avicenna, proposing the experience of the flying man, imagines a dismembered and disorganized human body, showing that, thus fragmented and suspended in the air, man can still say "I am," and that the pure entity is the experience of a body without either parts or organs; when Cavalcanti describes the poetic experience as the transformation of the living body into a mechanical automaton ("I walk like a man outside life / who seems, to those who see him, a man / made of branches or rocks or wood / who is led along by artifice");[7] when Condillac introduces his marble statue to the sense of smell, such that the statue "is no more than the scent of a rose"; when Dante desubjectifies the "I" of the poet into a third person (*I' mi son un*), a generic, homonymous being who functions only as a scribe in the dictation of love; when Rimbaud says "I is another"; when Kleist evokes the perfect body of the marionette as a paradigm of the absolute; and when Heidegger replaces the physical "I" with an empty and inessential being that is only its own ways of Being and has possibility only in the impossible—each time we must consider these "experiments without truth" with the greatest seriousness. Whoever submits himself to these experiments jeopardizes not so much the truth of his own statements as the very mode of his existence; he undergoes an anthropological change that is just as decisive in the context of the individual's natural history as the liberation of the hand by the erect position was for the primate or as was, for the reptile, the transformation of limbs that changed it into a bird.

The experiment that Melville entrusts to Bartleby is of this kind. If what is at issue in a scientific experiment can be defined by the question "Under what conditions can something occur or not occur, be true or be false?" what is at issue in Melville's story can instead be formulated in a question of the following form: "Under what conditions can something occur *and* (that is, at the same time) not occur, be true *no more than not be true*?" Only inside an experience that has thus retreated from all relation to truth, to the subsistence or nonsubsistence of things, does Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" acquire its full sense (or, alternatively, its nonsense). The formula cannot but bring to mind the propositions with which Wittgenstein, in his lecture on ethics, expresses his ethical experience par excellence: "I marvel at the sky because it exists," and "I am safe, whatever happens." The experience of a tautology—that is, a proposition that is impenetrable to truth conditions on account of always being true ("The sky is blue or the sky is not blue")—has its correlate in Bartleby in the experience of a thing's *capacity* to be true and, at the same time, not to be true. If no one dreams of verifying the scrivener's formula, this is because experiments without truth concern not the actual existence or nonexistence of a thing but exclusively its potentiality. And potentiality, insofar as it can be or not be, is by definition withdrawn from both truth conditions and, prior to the action of "the strongest of all principles," the principle of contradiction.

In first philosophy, a being that can both be and not be is said to be contingent. The experiment with which Bartleby threatens us is an experiment *de contingentia absoluta*.

2. In his "Elements" of natural right Leibniz summarizes the figures of modality as follows:

possibile (possible)	*est quicquid* (is something that)	*potest* (can)	*fieri (seu verum esse)* (do [or be true])
impossibile (impossible)		*non potest* (cannot)	
necessarium (necessary)		*non potest non* (cannot not)	
contingens (contingent)		*potest non* (can not)	

The fourth figure, the contingent, which can be or not be and which coincides with the domain of human freedom in its opposition to necessity, has given rise to the greatest number of difficulties. If Being at all times and places preserved its potential not to be, the past itself could in some sense be called into question, and moreover, no possibility would ever pass into actuality or remain in actuality. The aporias of contingency are, as a result, traditionally tempered by two principles.

The first, which could be defined as the *principle of the irrevocability of the past* (or of the unrealizability of potentiality in the past) is attributed by Aristotle to the tragic poet Agathon: "There is no will with regard to the past. This is why no one wants Troy to have been sacked, since no one decides what happened but only what will be and is possible; what has happened cannot not have been. This is why Agathon is right in saying: 'This only is denied even to God, / The power to undo what has been done.'"[8] This is the principle that the Latins expressed in the formula *factum infectum fieri nequit*, and that Aristotle, in *De coelo*, restates in terms of an impossibility of realizing the potentiality of the past: "there is no potentiality of what was, but only of Being and Becoming."

The second principle, which is closely tied to the first, is that of *conditioned necessity*, which limits the force of contingency with respect to actuality. Aristotle expresses it as follows: "what is is necessary as long as it is, and what is not is necessary as long as it is not" (*De interpretatione*, 19 a 22). Wolff, who summarizes it in the formula *quodlibet, dum est, necessario est*, defines this principle as a *canon tritissimus in philosophia* and founds it, not without reason, on the principle of noncontradiction ("It is impossible that A is and, at the same time, is not"). The logical strength of this second principle with respect to potentiality, however, is far from certain. Aristotle himself seems to belie it, for he writes in the *Metaphysics* that "all potentiality is, at the same time [*hama*], potentiality for the opposite" and reaches the conclusion that "he who walks has the potential not to walk, and he who does not walk has the potential to walk" (1047 a).

As Duns Scotus makes clear, the fact is that if there is a contradiction between two actual opposed realities (being P and not-being P), nothing keeps a thing from being actual and, at the same time, maintaining its potential not to be or to be otherwise. "By contingent," he writes, "I mean not something that is not necessary or eternal, but something whose opposite could have happened in the very moment in which it happened." At the same instant, I can thus act in one way and be able to act otherwise (or not to act at all). Scotus gives the name "will" not to decision but to the experience of the constitutive and irreducible co-belonging of capacity to and capacity not to, the will to and the will not to. According to the lapidary formula with which he expresses the only possible meaning of human freedom, "he who wills experiences his capacity not to will" (*experitur qui vult se posse non velle*). The will (like the Freudian unconscious, with its constitutive ambivalence) is the only domain that is withdrawn from the principle of noncontradiction; "only the will is indifferent to contraries" (*voluntas sola habet indifferentiam ad contraria*), since "with respect to the same object, it is capable both of willing and not willing, which are nevertheless contraries." Without retreating before the consequences of this thesis, Scotus extends the contingent character of willing even into divine will and the act of creation:

> In the same act of will, God wills contraries; he does not will that they exist together (since this is impossible), but he nevertheless wills them at the same time. In the same way, it is through a single intuition or a single science that he knows that contraries do not exist together and that, nevertheless, they are known together in the same cognitive act, which is one single act.

And, with ferocious irony, Scotus proposes that those who doubt contingency be submitted to the experiment already suggested by Avicenna: "those who deny contingency should be tortured until they admit that they could also have not been tortured."

3. Contingency is threatened by another objection, namely, that the necessary occurrence or nonoccurrence of a future event retroactively influences the moment of its prediction, canceling its contingency. This is the problem of "future contingents," which Leibniz summarizes in the *Theodicy* once again under the sign of writing: "It was true a hundred years ago that I would write today, just as three hundred years from now it will be true that I wrote today." Let us suppose that someone says that tomorrow there will be or will not be a battle at sea. If the battle occurs tomorrow, then it was already true the day before that it would take place, which means that it could not not take place; if, inversely, the battle does not occur, then it was always already true to say that it would not take place, which means that it was impossible for it to take place. In both cases, contingency is replaced by necessity and impossibility.

In medieval theology, the problem of future contingents is dramatically linked to that of divine prescience, which either calls into question the freedom of human will or destroys the very possibility of the revelation of divine will. On the one hand, once the future is necessary, the most rigid necessity deprives decision of all meaning; on the other hand, contingency and absolute uncertainty involve the angels and Christ himself. Richard Fitzralph, professor at Oxford at the beginning of the fourteenth century, thus argues *ad absurdum* in his *quaestio biblica* that "sweating

blood at Gethesmene, Christ foresaw his death no more than the continuation of his life, and the angels in the heavens did not foresee their eternal beatitude more than they imagined their eternal misery, since they knew that, if God wanted it, they could be forever miserable."

How can one impede the argument *de praesenti ad praeteritum* that ruins the contingency of the future, without thereby depriving statements about the future of all certainty? Aristotle's solution to the problem is elegant: "it is necessary," he writes in *De interpretatione*, "that every thing be or not be, as well as that it will be or will not be; but it is not at all the case that one then says that one thing or the other, once isolated, is necessary. For example, I say that tomorrow there will or will not be a battle at sea; and yet it is not necessary for a battle at sea to occur, nor is it necessary for it not to occur" (19 a 28–32).

Necessity thus concerns not the occurrence or nonoccurrence of the particular event but rather the alternative "it-will-occur-or-it-will-not-occur" as a whole. In other words, only the tautology (in Wittgenstein's sense) "tomorrow there will or will not be a battle at sea" is necessarily always true, whereas each of the two members of the alternative is returned to contingency, its possibility to be or not to be.

In this context, it is all the more crucial to uphold the principle of conditioned necessity. This is why Aristotle must define the possible-potential (*dynaton*) in the following terms: "A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing impotential" (*esti de dynaton touto, hōi ean hyparxei hē energeia ou legetai ekhein tēn dynamēn, ouden estai adynaton*) (*Metaphysics*, 1047 a 24–26). The last three words of the definition (*ouden estai adynaton*) do not mean, as the usual and completely trivializing reading maintains, "there will be nothing impossible" (that is, what is not impossible is possible). They specify, rather, the condition in which potentiality—which can both be and not be—can realize itself (this is also shown by the analogous definition of the contingent in the *Prior Analytics*, 32 a 28–20, where Aristotle's text must be translated as follows: "I say that the contingent can also occur and that once it exists, given that it is not necessary, there will be no potential in it not to be"). What is potential can pass over into actuality only at the point at which it sets aside its own potential not to be (its *adynamia*), when nothing in it is potential not to be and it when it can, therefore, not not-be.

Yet how is one to understand this nullification of the potential not to be? And once the possible is realized, what happens to what was capable of not being?

4. In the *Theodicy*, in an apologue that is as grandiose as it is terrible, Leibniz justified the right of what was against what could have been but was not. Continuing the story told by Lorenzo Valla in his dialogue, *De libero arbitrio*, Leibniz imagines that Sextus Tarquinius travels to the temple of Jove at Dodona, unsatisfied with the response given to him by the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, who predicted ill fortune if he wanted to be king in Rome. Sextus accuses Jove of having condemned him to a miserable life and asks Jove to change his fate or, at least, admit his wrong. Sextus abandons himself to his destiny when Jove refuses his request, once again telling him he must renounce the kingship of Rome. But Theodorus, Jove's priest, who is present at the scene, wants to know more. Following Jove's advice, he visits the temple of Pallas in Athens, where he falls into a deep sleep and dreams that he has traveled to an unknown country. There, the goddess shows him the Palace of Destinies, an immense pyramid that shines at its peak, extending infinitely downwards. Each of the innumerable apartments that compose the palace represents one of Sextus's possible destinies, to which there corresponds a possible world that was never realized. In one of these apartments, Theodorus sees Sextus leaving Dodona's temple persuaded by the god; he travels to Corinth, where he buys a small garden, discovers a treasure while cultivating it, and lives happily to a ripe old age, loved and respected by all. In another chamber, Sextus is in Thrace, where he marries the daughter of the king and inherits the throne, becoming the happy sovereign of a people that venerates him. In another, he leads a life that is mediocre but painless. And so it continues, from apartment to apartment, from possible destiny to possible destiny:

> The halls rose in a pyramid, becoming even more beautiful as one mounted towards the apex, and representing more beautiful worlds. They finally reached the highest one, which completed the pyramid and was the most beautiful of all. For the pyramid had a beginning, but one could not see its end; it had an apex, but no base, since it went on to infinity. This is so, the goddess explained, because among an endless number of possible worlds there is the best of all; otherwise God would not have determined to create it. But there is not one that does not also have less perfect worlds beneath it; this is why the pyramid goes on descending to infinity. Theodorus, entering this highest hall, became entranced in ecstasy. . . . "We are in the real true world,"

said the goddess, "and you are at the source of happiness. Behold what Jupiter makes ready for you, if you continue to serve him faithfully. Here is Sextus as he is, and as he will be in reality. He leaves the temple in a rage, scorning the counsel of the Gods. You see him going to Rome, bringing confusion everywhere, violating the wife of his friend. There he is driven out with his father, beaten, unhappy. If Jupiter had placed here a Sextus happy at Corinth or King in Thrace, it would be no longer this world. And nevertheless he could not have failed to choose this world, which surpasses in perfection all the others, and which forms the apex of the pyramid."[9]

The pyramid of possible worlds represents the divine intellect, whose ideas, Leibniz writes, "contain possibilities for all eternity." God's mind is the Piranesi-like prison or, rather, the Egyptian mausoleum that, until the end of time, guards the image of what was not, but could have been. And God, Leibniz says, who has chosen the best of all possible worlds (that is, the world that is most possible, for it contains the greatest number of compossible events), sometimes visits this immense mausoleum "to enjoy the pleasure of recapitulating things and of renewing his own choice, which cannot fail to please him." It is difficult to imagine something more pharisaic than this demiurge, who contemplates all uncreated possible worlds to take delight in his own single choice. For to do so, he must close his own ears to the incessant lamentation that, throughout the infinite chambers of this Baroque inferno of potentiality, arises from everything that could have been but was not, from everything that could have been otherwise but had to be sacrificed for the present world to be as it is. The best of all possible worlds projects an infinite shadow downward, which sinks lower and lower to the extreme universe—which even celestial beings cannot comprehend—in which nothing is compossible with anything else and nothing can take place.

5. It is in the "Egyptian architecture" of this Palace of Destinies that Bartleby conducts his experiment. He holds strictly to the Aristotelian statement that the tautology "it-will-occur-or-it-will-not-occur" is necessarily true as a whole, beyond the taking place of either of the two possibilities. Bartleby's experiment concerns precisely the place of this truth; it has to do exclusively with the occurrence of a potentiality as such, that is, something that can both be and not be. But such an experiment is possible only by calling into question the principle of the irrevocability of the past, or rather, by contesting the retroactive unrealizability of potentiality. Overturning the sense of the argument *de praesenti ad praeteritum*,

Bartleby inaugurates an absolutely novel *quaestio disputata*, that of "past contingents." The necessary truth of the tautology "Sextus-will-go-to-Rome-or-will-not-go-to-Rome" retroactively acts on the past not to make it necessary but, rather, to return it to its potential not to be.

Benjamin once expressed the task of redemption that he assigned to memory in the form of a theological experience of the past: "What research has established can be modified by remembrance. Remembrance can make the incomplete (happiness) complete, and the complete (pain) incomplete. This is theology—but the experience of remembrance forbids us to conceive of history in a fundamentally atheological manner, even as we are not allowed to write history directly in theological concepts." Remembrance restores possibility to the past, making what happened incomplete and completing what never was. Remembrance is neither what happened nor what did not happen but, rather, their potentialization, their becoming possible once again. It is in this sense that Bartleby calls the past into question, re-calling it—not simply to redeem what was, to make it exist again but, more precisely, to consign it once again to potentiality, to the indifferent truth of the tautology. "I would prefer not to" is the *restitutio in integrum* of possibility, which keeps possibility suspended between occurrence and nonoccurrence, between the capacity to be and the capacity not to be.

Potentiality can be turned back toward the past in two ways. The first is the one Nietzsche assigns to the eternal return. For him, precisely the repugnance, the "counterwill" (*Widerwille*), of will toward the past and its "thus it was" is the origin of the spirit of revenge, the worst punishment devised by men: "'It was'—that is the name of the will's gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. Powerless against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that is past. The will cannot will backwards . . . its fury is that time cannot go backwards. 'What was'—this is the stone the will cannot turn over."[10]

The impossibility of "wanting Troy to have been sacked," of which Aristotle speaks in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, is what torments the will, transforming it into resentment. This is why Zarathustra is the one who teaches the will to "will backwards" (*zurückwollen*) and to transform every "thus it was" into a "thus I willed it": "this alone is liberation." Solely concerned with repressing the spirit of revenge, Nietzsche completely forgets the laments of what was not or could have been otherwise. An echo of this lament is still audible in Blanqui, when, in a prison cell

in the Fort du Taureau, evoking the eternal return ten years before Nietzsche, he bitterly grants actual existence to all the possible worlds of the Palace of Destinies:

> The number of our doubles is infinite in time and space. One can hardly demand more from the mind. These doubles are flesh and blood, even in pants, in crinolone and chignon. They are not ghosts but eternity made real. And yet this is a great defect; there is no progress. Alas, these are vulgar new editions, repeats. Such are the exemplars of past worlds, of worlds to come. Let us not forget that *everything that could have happened here has happened somewhere else.*

In Zarathustra, this echo is completely muffled. In the end, Nietzsche's eternal return is only an atheistic variation of Leibniz's *Theodicy*. Each of the pyramid's apartments now hosts the eternal repetition of what happened, thereby canceling the difference between the actual world and the possible world and returning potentiality to what was. And it is not an accident that Leibniz was the first to formulate—in almost the same terms—Nietzsche's decisive experience:

> If the human species lasted long enough in its present state, a time would necessarily come in which even the lives of individuals would return in the same circumstances, down to the smallest details. I myself would return, to live once again in the city called Hannover, on the banks of the Leine river, once again busy studying the history of Brunswick and writing the same letters to the same friends.

Bartleby holds fast to this solution until he decides to give up copying. Benjamin discerns the inner correspondence between copying and the eternal return when he compares Nietzsche's concept to *die Strafe des Nachsitzens*, that is, the punishment assigned by the teacher to negligent schoolchildren that consists in copying out the same text countless times. ("The eternal return is copying projected onto the cosmos. Humanity must copy out its texts in innumerable repetitions.") The infinite repetition of what was abandons all its potential not to be. In its obstinate copying, as in Aristotle's contingency, there is no potential not to be. The will to power is, in truth, the will to will, an eternally repeated action; only as such is it potentialized. This is why the scrivener must stop copying, why he must give up his work.

6. At the end of Melville's story, the man of the law discretely proposes an interpretation of Bartleby on the basis of a piece of gossip. This "report" is that Bartleby "had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in the administration."[11] As elsewhere in the story, the man of the law furnishes the reader with correct information; but as always, the explanation he draws from it is off the mark. He insinuates that having worked in that office pushed the scrivener's innate temperament to "a pallid hopelessness." Bartleby's deplorable behavior and his mad formula, he suggests, can be clarified as the final stage of a preexistent pathological disposition precipitated by unfortunate circumstances. This explanation is trivial not so much because, like all psychological explanations, it ends by presupposing itself, as because it entirely fails to question the particular link between dead letters and Bartleby's formula. Why does a pallid hopelessness express itself in precisely this way and not another?

Yet it is the man of the law, once again, who allows us to answer the question. "Sometimes," he says,

> from out of the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.[12]

There could be no clearer way to suggest that undelivered letters are the cipher of joyous events that could have been, but never took place. What took place was, instead, the opposite possibility. On the writing tablet of the celestial scribe, the letter, the act of writing, marks the passage from potentiality to actuality, the occurrence of a contingency. But precisely for this reason, every letter also marks the nonoccurrence of something; every letter is always in this sense a "dead letter." This is the intolerable truth that Bartleby learned in the Washington office, and this is the meaning of the singular formula, "on errands of life, those letters speed to death."

Until now, it has not been noted that this formula is, in fact, a barely disguised citation from Romans 7:10, *euretē moi hē entolē hē eis zōēn, autē eis thanaton*, which, in the translation Melville would have known, reads as follows: "And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death" (*entolē* is a "mandate," what is sent for a reason—hence *epistolē*, "letter"—and is more correctly rendered by "errand" than by "commandment"). In Paul's text, the mandate, the *entolē*, is that of the

Law from which the Christian has been freed. The mandate is referred to the "oldness of the letter" to which the apostle has just opposed the "newness of spirit": "But now we are delivered from the Law, that being dead where we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, not in the oldness of the letter" (Rom. 7:6, but see also 2 Cor. 3:6, "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life"). In this light, not only the relationship between Bartleby and the man of the law but even that between Bartleby and writing acquires a new sense. Bartleby is a "law-copyist," a scribe in the evangelical sense of the term, and his renunciation of copying is also a reference to the Law, a liberation from the "oldness of the letter." Critics have viewed Bartleby, like Joseph K., as a Christ figure (Deleuze calls him "a new Christ") who comes to abolish the old Law and to inaugurate a new mandate (ironically, it is the lawyer himself who recalls this to him: "A new commandment give I unto you that ye love one another"). But if Bartleby is a new Messiah, he comes not, like Jesus, to redeem what was, but to save what was not. The Tartarus into which Bartleby, the new savior, descends is the deepest level of the Palace of Destinies, that whose sight Leibniz cannot tolerate, the world in which nothing is compossible with anything else, where "nothing exists rather than something." And Bartleby comes not to bring a new table of the Law but, as in the Cabalistic speculations on the messianic kingdom, to fulfill the Torah by destroying it from top to bottom. Scripture is the law of the first creation (which the Cabalists call the "Torah of Beriah"), in which God created the world on the basis of its potential to be, keeping it separate from its potential not to be. Every letter of this Torah is, therefore, turned both toward life and toward death; it signifies both the ring and the finger intended for it, which disintegrates in the grave, both what was and what could not be.

The interruption of writing marks the passage to the second creation, in which God summons all his potential not to be, creating on the basis of a point of indifference between potentiality and impotentiality. The creation that is now fulfilled is neither a re-creation nor an eternal repetition; it is, rather, a decreation in which what happened and what did not happen are returned to their originary unity in the mind of God, while what could have not been but was becomes indistinguishable from what could have been but was not.

A Persian Neoplatonist once expressed the shadow that contingency casts on every creature in the image of the dark wing of the archangel Gabriel:

> Know that Gabriel has two wings. The first, the one on the right, is pure light. This wing is the sole and pure relation of Gabriel's Being with God. Then there is the left wing. This wing is grazed with a dark figure resembling the crimson color of the moon at dawn or the peacock's claw. This shadowy figure is Gabriel's capacity to be, which has one side turned toward non-Being (since it is, as such, also a capacity not to be). If you consider Gabriel in his act of Being through God's Being, then his Being is said to be necessary, since under this aspect it cannot not be. But if you consider him in his right to existence in itself, this right is immediately to the same degree a right not to be, since such is the right of a being that does not have its capacity to be in itself (and that is, therefore, a capacity not to be).

Decreation is the immobile flight sustained by the black wing alone. At this wing's every beating, the actual world is led back to its right not to be; all possible worlds are led back to their right to existence. Sextus the ill-fated tyrant of Rome and Sextus the happy peasant of Corinth blend together and can no longer be told apart. Gabriel's dark wing is the eternal scale keeping the best of all possible worlds carefully balanced against the counterweight of all impossible worlds. Decreation takes place at the point where Bartleby stands, "in the heart of the eternal pyramid" of the Palace of Destinies, which, in this ironic and inverted theodicy, is also called the Halls of Justice. His word is not Justice, which gives a reward or a perpetual punishment to what was, but instead Palingenesis, *apokatastasis pantōn*, in which the new creature—for the new creature is what is at issue here—reaches the indemonstrable center of its "occurrence-or-nonoccurrence." This is the irrevocable end of the letter's journey, which, on errands of life, sped toward death. And it is here that the creature is finally at home, saved in being irredeemable. This is why in the end, the walled courtyard is not a sad place. There is sky and there is grass. And the creature knows perfectly well "where it is."

animi voluptate, quieteque consistere et oblectari in re aliqua, in qua prius in dubio aut solicitudine anima fuisset), it is never used with the reflexive pronoun.

§15 *Bartleby, or On Contingency*

1. A different translation of this passage can be found in *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle (Grinnell, Iowa: The Peripatetic Press, 1979), p. 209.
2. Herman Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener," in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories*, ed. Harold Beaver (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 73.
3. Ibid., pp. 88–89.
4. Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 73–74; the original is in Gilles Deleuze, *Critique et clinique* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1993), p. 95.
5. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 488.
6. Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener," p. 89.
7. "I' vo come colui ch' è fuor di vita / che pare, a chi lo sguarda, ch' omo / sia fatto di rame o di pietra o di legno / che si conduca solo per maestria."
8. *Aristotle in Twenty-Three Volumes*, vol. 19: *The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 1139 b 6–10 (p. 331).
9. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, trans. E. M. Huggard (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 372.
10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (London: Penguin, 1954), p. 139.
11. Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener," p. 99.
12. Ibid.

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