"Bartleby" on Speed

ALEX BENSON
Bard College

This essay develops a new way to parse the scrivener's refusals: through Melville's representation of labor as a field of variant, sometimes incommensurable, velocities.

What follows are the instructions for an exercise titled "One Word," the twelfth entry in experimental musician Pauline Oliveros's *Sonic Meditations* (1974):

> Choose one word. Dwell silently on this word. When you are ready, explore every sound in this work extremely slowly, repeatedly. Gradually, imperceptibly bring the word up to normal speed, then continue until you are repeating the word as fast as possible. Continue at top speed until "it stops."[1]

It probably falls to me, professionally, to place a "[sic]" in the third sentence of this performance score, indicating my awareness that "work" is a typographic interloper, that, almost half a century ago, some proofreader dropped the ball.[2] I would rather not. I will, though, explain the reason for my resistance, the reason that "work" strikes me as incidentally appropriate in Oliveros's text and also, more to the point, here, in the first steps of an essay about Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) and about the temporalities of such tasks as proofreading.

The above meditation might seem miles away from "work," in its sense as a noun meaning labor. Oliveros's introductory notes suggest that such practices may have a healing effect, implying a sense of the human body not as an instrument for the production of surplus value but as a site for affective response (Introduction II). Notice, too, how the directions play with time. Whereas discourses both of labor management and of labor organization customarily emphasize the amount of time on the job (and the ratio between that amount and other measurable quantities of productivity or compensation), the actions outlined in "One Word" involve instead a plurality of temporal modes: the indefinite overture of reflection, the slow cyclicality of the repeated word, the

Vol. 21.1 (2019): 120–137

acceleration of this repetition, the uncertain teleology of the activity's conclusion. Until *what* stops?

But the features that might, then, separate this artwork from work—its pluralistic temporalities, their relation to affective experience—are precisely what align it with Melville's representation of work in "Bartleby." Related questions of temporal plurality have recently occupied many scholars of American literature, including Wai Chee Dimock, who remarks that "standardization is not everywhere the rule" (2)—perhaps not even, I will argue, on Bartleby's Wall Street. The question of temporal "standardization" also figures, of course, in political economy; extending Louis Althusser's remark that "for each mode of production there is a peculiar time" (99), Fredric Jameson has observed that this does not only apply to large-scale categories such as capitalism but also opens up "subtler differentiations for a whole range of distinct modes of production" (707). My contention is that Melville observes the same opening and exploits it maximally. In pursuit of this claim, I will attend closely to his representation—both in "Bartleby" and in other early works, particularly *Typee* and *Moby-Dick*—of the temporal peculiarities of highly localized and differentiated modes of production. So this reading will have less to do with "Bartleby" as an allegory of sovereign coercion and refusal or of the market constraints of artistic labor (topics to which many valuable studies have turned our attention) than with how it mediates the practical forms of work. What coils through and around those forms, coordinating and confusing them, is speed. Melville treats speed, in all its degrees, not only as a measurable quantity within a temporal order, but more particularly as a concept that traverses multiple modes of spatiotemporal (and so social) experience: sequence, simultaneousness, synchrony, length.[3]

Sequence

If we had to choose one word in connection with "Bartleby," a word that seemed to set the conditions for the whole literary work, there would be an obvious candidate. I will meditate here, though, on another: "rather." It features in the Lawyer's opening line: "I am a rather elderly man" (*Piazza Tales* 13). Used in another sense, the word uncannily twins "prefer." "I would rather not," another scrivener might have said.[4] Melville's did not, but there's more to the connection. The word "rather" develops from "rathe," of still earlier Germanic sources, meaning "quickly, rapidly . . . without delay," and the OED lists a later meaning as "earlier" or "sooner" ("rather," adv., I.1). In connection with this sense of rapidity and immediacy, the adverb develops its senses of "priority, preference, contrast, or degree" (II) and of something happening "sooner (as

a matter of choice); more readily or willingly; with greater liking or goodwill; in preference" (III.8). The Lawyer uses the word about a dozen times as a modifier of degree, but he uses it to mean "sooner (as a matter of choice)" only once, when he decides to take his own path of "passive resistance" (23) with Bartleby: "you will not thrust such a helpless creature out of your door?" he asks himself; "you will not dishonor yourself by such cruelty? No, I will not, I cannot do that. *Rather* would I let him live and die here, and then mason up his remains in the wall" (38, my emphasis). Frequently the word "than" follows such a use of "rather"—rather would I let him die here *than* dishonor myself—but in this case, since the disfavored action is already detailed in the previous lines, the Lawyer can smuggle in a near-homophonic substitute: not "rather . . . than" but "rather . . . and then." Deviating from the standard formulation, this also takes "rather" right back to its roots in the idea of sequentiality. It is a word that frames preference as a question not just of taste but also of timing, and that frames the degrees of a quality—what something is more like, and what it is less like—as a matter of descriptive order. "Rather elderly" does not tell us much more than "elderly," except that one would call him elderly before, or with greater speed, than one would not.

This might seem a mere verbal fluke, were the Lawyer's lexicon not rife with references to speed. This fact tends to be underplayed in critical commentary, either because it seems self-evident (in which case its consequences merit elaboration) or because it does not fit the Lawyer's professed preference for the "easiest path" as opposed to his professional peers' "turbulence" (14). And he does seem to enjoy the administration of a rhythmic balance, as Turkey accelerates and Nippers decelerates over the course of the day. He hires Bartleby, though, out of a contingent need to "push" his scriveners (19). At first, Bartleby's impressive rate of copying satisfies this need. But notice the density of speed-related terms when the Lawyer first asks him to help proofread: "Now and then, in the *haste* of business," he would himself work with a scrivener to check a copy; one day when "much *hurried* to complete a small affair I had in hand," he "*abruptly* called to Bartleby. In my *haste* and natural expectancy of *instant* compliance," he holds out the copy in such a way "that *immediately* upon emerging from his retreat, Bartleby might snatch it and proceed to business *without the least delay*"; when he does not, the Lawyer repeats himself by "*rapidly* stating what it was I wanted him to do" (20, my emphases). And when he finally gives up, it is because "my business hurried me. . . . So calling Nippers from the other room, the paper was speedily examined" (21). Next time he tries to request the same task—proofreading, though this time with all the other employees also reading along—he calls Bartleby over with a "quick, I am waiting" (21).

In response, as Bartleby rises reluctantly, there is the "slow scrape of his chair legs" (21). I am not the first to suggest that we think of Bartleby's intractability as a function of such slowness. David Eng, for instance, has seen in "Bartleby" a precedent for Tsai Ming-Liang's film *Walker* (2012), which follows a figure traversing various Hong Kong locations at about a step per minute, to some viewers' irritation. "What is it," Eng asks, "about this slow-moving figure that frustrates and enrages, that makes the presence of his body's incremental movement so 'unbearable'?" (par. 10). Similarly, in a comparison with André Breton and César Aira, Craig Epplin draws from Bartleby's disruptive slowness the sense that "refusals, and affirmations too for that matter, issue forth from movement itself" (par. 4). This observation underscores one of the analytical distinctions of speed: it requires attention, as Epplin suggests, to both spatial and temporal difference, as a function of their relation. Consider the Lawyer's eventual invitation for Bartleby to leave the office and move in with him:

> "Come, let us start *now*, *right away*."
> "No: *at present* I would prefer not to make any change at all."
> I answered nothing; but effectually dodging every one by the *suddenness and rapidity* of my flight, *rushed* from the building. (41–42, my emphases)

As a counterpoint to the Lawyer's comical rush, Bartleby's occupation seems to stake its claim not only to space but also to time.[5] A parallel moment earlier in the story might seem to contradict the two characters' roles as respectively fast and slow; when Bartleby repulses the Lawyer from the office in the earlier instance, the Lawyer reports that he himself "slowly went down stairs and out into the street" (35). This seeming exception may, however, fall under the general rule, since the Lawyer attributes his disposition here to "that wondrous ascendency which the inscrutable scrivener had over me"; the contagion of Bartleby's verbal preferences has extended into the field of kinesis (35). His few moments of high velocity (copying industriously) give way to a slowness that carries through to the last movement the Lawyer observes: "he slowly moved to the other side of the inclosure" (44).

To call that a "last" moment for Bartleby, as I just did, is accurate in one sense, but there is another scene after this one: the Lawyer's closing remarks on Bartleby's tenure at the Dead Letter Office, teased at the story's beginning as a "vague report which will appear in the sequel" (13). One recent anthology is careful to gloss "in the sequel" as "in the following story" (Mays 623, n.1), forestalling the potential misunderstanding of the line as promising a subsequent entry in a series ("Bartleby II"?). This clarification conforms with how Melville often uses the word; at the beginning of "The Castaway" in *Moby-Dick*, he writes that Pip's experience—jumping from the whale-boat against Stubb's

orders, going mad when left to tread water until the Pequod saves him—makes him a "living and ever accompanying prophecy of whatever shattered sequel" might befall the ship (411). But "Bartleby" was, of course, serialized in two installments in *Putnam*'s, and the dead letters passage does come in part two; moreover, when most "Bartleby" critics refer to the Lawyer's "sequel" (see Parker), they do not mean "the following story" but more specifically the discrete unit that is the epilogue, separated typographically by a line of eight asterisks. In fact, this is analogous with the word's use when it reappears at the end of "The Castaway": "in the sequel of the narrative will then be seen what like abandonment befell myself" (414). While that abandonment does occur in the story that follows, more specifically it occurs in Ishmael's epilogue, so isolated a textual unit that, famously, it fell out of the first London edition. So, for Melville, "sequel" can name both the continuous flow of a projected future and a discrete entry in a sequence.

And in his work this ambiguity often sits in proximity to questions of authority. Pip's story, while bookended by different senses of the "sequel," itself interweaves multiple notions of what it means to follow: Pip does not follow Stubb's orders—"Stick to the boat" (413), no matter what—and the whaleboats Stubb assumed were following behind him divert for other whales. In "The Encantadas," "wicked sea-officers" (*Piazza Tales* 128) are imagined to be turned into tortoises, with their "slow draggings" across desolate terrain, as payback for their abuses (129). In "Benito Cereno," if the motto "'*Seguid vuestro jefe*' (follow your leader)" (*Piazza Tales* 49) underscores the lexical links among sequel, sequence, and follow, the conclusion adds a further twist: months after Babo's execution, "Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader" (117); just when Babo seems to be identified as the leader to "follow," that word comes to mean not submission but subsequence. This irony itself, though, suggests a way of reading authority in terms of sequence. To follow someone is to affirm their capacity to issue an imperative that results, with causal continuity, in one's action. Or one can ignore the order. One can jump from the boat.

Or one can stick to the office. One can interrupt the causation of an imperative through a slow, torpid dragging decelerated to the point of stasis. "Between the immobile and mobility," writes the sculptor Pol Bury, "a certain quality of slowness reveals to us a field of 'actions' in which the eye is no longer able to trace an object's journeys." When something moves extremely quickly from A to B, this makes for "a confusion which can become so great that A and B approach close enough to each other to become indistinguishable. But perceived in terms of slowness A is no longer necessarily the point of departure towards B" (234).[6] What looks like a continuous sequence in the middle of the

spectrum of velocity, that is, can seem non-sequential at both poles—but, Bury suggests, not symmetrically: as a discontinuous multiplicity of durations on the slow side and as a confused singularity on the fast side.

The well-known fire-lighting episode in *Typee* plays with this spectrum:

> At first Kory-Kory goes to work quite leisurely, but gradually quickens his pace, and waxing warm in the employment, drives the stick furiously along the smoking channel, plying his hands to and fro with amazing rapidity . . . all his previous labors are vain if he cannot sustain the rapidity of the movement until the reluctant spark is produced. Suddenly he stops, becomes perfectly motionless. His hands still retain their hold of the smaller stick, which is pressed convulsively against the further end of the channel among the fine powder there accumulated, as if he had just pierced through and through some little viper that was wriggling and struggling to escape from his clutches. The next moment a delicate wreath of smoke curls spirally into the air. (111)

Many critics have noted the passage's eroticism.[7] I'd suggest, though, that Tommo's narration sexualizes Kory-Kory's activity precisely in its sequential representation of speeds, in an acceleration of his "labors" from a "leisurely" pace to "amazing rapidity," culminating in a deceleration (a "stop," in fact, not unlike Oliveros's similarly accelerating exercise) so abrupt and total that he appears "perfectly motionless," as if his climactic release from compulsive motion gets him ecstatically stuck in time. Then time gets unstuck; we return to a diachronic, A-to-B world: "the next moment," the fire starts. Even in the hiatus, though, Kory-Kory cannot have been perfectly motionless.[8] The smaller stick still quivers like "some little viper." This slight convulsing action must be concealed in the minute movements of the palm and fingerpads, just as the action's report is concealed grammatically, registered in an adverb stuck onto a passive voice formation: "the smaller stick . . . is pressed convulsively." Kory-Kory's labor, the report of which begins as a continual sequence of actions, suddenly decelerates to such an extreme, asymptotically approaching zero speed, that Tommo's narration—the voice, that is, of the person in the scene who is not working—can only represent this moment of seeming discontinuity, this break into nonsequential stillness, as the absolute it is not.

Simultaneousness

That sense of stillness pertains to the ethnographic imagination of Tommo—with whom I will stay a moment longer—more broadly as well. Michael Berthold has argued that "the decelerated pace of Typee" is ironically suggestive less of the captivity narrative than of "the slave narrative,

where daily life is characterized by exhausting sameness"; although Tommo "suffers from no violent toil or whip," he withers under the feeling that "one Typeean day epitomizes all Typeean days: 'uniform,' 'undiversified'" (566). The source of such a feeling is another question; the observational bias that might produce the image of a nonwestern culture as static, external to history, has been described by Johannes Fabian in terms of the "ethnographic present," not only an epistemological orientation but also a narrative tense—the same tense, as Bryan C. Short points out, that Tommo uses in narrating the fire-lighting scene (26).[9] What is curious, then, is how an ambient sense of "decelerated pace" frames, in that scene, a movement that accelerates to such "amazing rapidity" that it leads to that condition where, in Bury's words, one event and the next "approach close enough to each other to become indistinguishable," to become practically simultaneous.

One way to sort this out is by considering different models of simultaneity. Or, in the synonym Melville preferred, simultaneousness. In one sense, the concept can refer to multiple events occurring at different spatial coordinates at exactly the same instant (as measured, per *Pierre*'s Plotinus Plinlimmon, by a perfectly regulated central chronometer, not your average compromising timepiece [211–15]). Benedict Anderson describes the "steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity" (31) of individuals operating in homogenously ordered empty time—the kind of time, he suggests, that characterizes both the nation and the traditional novel form.[10] And he opposes this to a messianic model of "simultaneity-along-time" where, in certain circumstances, both "past" and "future" events can be understood as identical or historically recursive (30). In an acute interpretation of "Benito Cereno," Kelly Ross has recently tracked how Babo manipulates European expectations of linearity in contrast with an islamicist sense of messianic time. The fire-starting scene in *Typee* differently negotiates models of simultaneousness. Tommo concludes the passage with a kind of moral: while Europeans, he remarks, have fast ways to light a fire (e.g., matches), they work frantically to provide for their families; whereas Typee, breaking their back to spark some tinder, just eat the fruit off the trees. For Tommo, both worlds hold some phenomenological balance between the arduous and the easy. The transoceanic comparison is itself expressed as simultaneous ("whilst") in the sense that presumes empty, linear time (112). Yet in the microcosm of Kory-Kory's activity, as the work accelerates so fast that it approaches linear simultaneity, suddenly, with his becoming "perfectly still," this starts to look like simultaneity-along-time in the altered form of stasis.

If we move laterally across Melville's body of work (deferring "Bartleby" one moment more), we can begin to get a sense of the further affective valences

of simultaneousness. This will have to remain woefully schematic in the space of this essay, but *Typee* and *Moby-Dick* offer a useful contrast. In *Typee* "simultaneous" appears at moments of distress. A few examples: "had I been pierced simultaneously by three Happar spears, I could not have started more" (139); "the whole company, manifesting an equal degree of horror, simultaneously screamed out 'taboo!'" (221); "fearful that I might slip from them, several of the islanders now raised a simultaneous shout" (250). Among simultaneousness's associated states: pierced, startled, horrified, fearful.

In *Moby-Dick*, though, the term usually marks the efficient coordination of labor: "the boat's five oars were seen simultaneously peaked" (220); "the combined and simultaneous industry of almost the entire ship's company" (428); "thus the work proceeds; the two tackles hoisting and lowering simultaneously" (304). Half a dozen more instances take similar form. But there are exceptions, places where the term recovers some of its *Typee*an texture. In "The Line," Ishmael refers to the "simultaneousness of volition and action" required to avoid the whale-line as it exits the tub, but sustaining such perfect responsiveness seems impossible in the context of the chapter's fatalism (280–81). When he tries to imagine the whale "simultaneously" processing the ocular information that comes in through the eyes on both sides of his huge head, skeptically comparing this to the unthinkable idea of someone "simultaneously" working through two Euclidean proofs, he sounds staggered (331).[11] And consider the long sentence, tied together by the word "while," describing the whale's attack in "The Chase—Second Day":

> *While* the two crews were yet circling in the waters, reaching out after the revolving line-tubs, oars, and other floating furniture, *while* aslope little Flask bobbed up and down like an empty vial, twitching his legs upwards to escape the dreaded jaws of sharks; and Stubb was lustily singing out for some one to ladle him up; and *while* the old man's line—now parting—admitted of his pulling into the creamy pool to rescue whom he could;—in that wild *simultaneousness* of a thousand concreted perils,—Ahab's yet unstricken boat seemed drawn up towards Heaven by invisible wires,—*as*, arrow-like, shooting perpendicularly from the sea, the White Whale dashed his broad forehead against its bottom. (559, my emphases)

Here the "ever-present perils of life" (281) Ishmael warns of earlier are "concreted," no longer a possibility that could always eventuate in the *next* instant but one that has arrived *now* in a scene of "wild simultaneousness." That phrasing seems backward, though; should it not be *simultaneous wildness*? But in Ishmael's formation, it is as if the very stillness of the tableau vivant is what makes it unsettling, providing a backdrop of perfectly spatialized action against which Moby Dick can strike with geometrical ("perpendicular")

precision, and revealing the dread that had been latent in all that eerily concerted labor all long.

Thereafter, simultaneousness stays wild. In "The Chase—Third Day," the whale darts off, "almost simultaneously, with a mighty volition of ungraduated, instantaneous swiftness" (569)—then "wheeled round" again (570). Then as the drama concludes and Tashtego, going down with the ship, nails the flag as high as he can reach on the sinking mainmast, he happens to pin a bird to the spar with his hammer and—"simultaneously feeling that etherial thrill" of the "fluttering wing"—keeps it pinned there so that it'll drown along with him. (It had, to be fair, been "incommoding" him.) "Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf," as Ishmael reports in the final moment before his epilogue, "then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (572). At this "now," and with the "as" that also marked Moby Dick's perpendicular attack, we shift into another sense of simultaneousness, one that spiralizes with the deep-time recursions of the waves and the birds.[12]

If we were looking for another way to describe what is going on in these examples (Kory-Kory's rapidity leading to stillness, the freneticism of *Moby-Dick*'s climax leading to the same old ocean, and perhaps, to stick with the hammer but not with Melville, John Henry, victorious, succumbing), we might call on "Bartleby" and call it *speeding to death*. As the Lawyer's sequel describes the fate of postal material burned at the Dead Letter Office: "on errands of life, these letters speed to death" (45). The antithesis of life/death lends a sense of tragic irony to these eager, oblivious letters, with a rhetorical polish that might obscure the logical oddity here. The lawyer has just explained that these letters—which have been sitting in an office for some time—were all too late to help the addressees, who have all presumably perished, many in distress; but if they had really been speeding, maybe some of those stories would have ended otherwise. Perhaps "speed," here, takes on a shade of its older sense in connection with completion, ending, or the last exhaustion of something or someone, as in Mercutio's "I am sped" (*Romeo & Juliet* 3.1.92). Amiri Baraka's poem "Wailers (for Larry Neal and Bob Marley)" tightens this connection—"We could dig Melville on his ship / confronting the huge white mad beast / speeding death cross the sea to we" (256)—using speed as a transitive verb and death its direct object: something sped, something sent.

The association between "dead letters and dead correspondents" was not uncommon in the mid-nineteenth century, according to David Henkin (142). Yet the transfer of mail to the dead letters pile could happen for any number of reasons: "when persons or towns were misidentified and when recipients

moved, neglected to inquire at the post, or otherwise fell through the cracks" (165). Which brings out something still weirder about the Lawyer's characterization of these intended recipients. A lot of them are probably doing okay. The Lawyer's inability to imagine that letters were undeliverable for reasons other than death may tell us he is a ghoul. But it also, I would venture, registers the regime of temporality that guides his management of the office. Carefully maintaining its diurnal rhythm, expecting his haste to be mirrored in the behavior of others, he cannot seem to encompass the idea of a living person who expects (or, for that matter, who has no knowledge of) a piece of mail that has not come, and will never come, because it is caught in the extremity of postal asynchrony, the spatiotemporal isolation, that is the undeliverable pile. One never knows when a particular piece of mail will be received, read, answered; even when it goes smoothly, postal communication is an asynchronous interaction. This is also true of some of Bartleby's tasks. But not all of them.

Synchrony

To defray the costs of life during graduate school in the early twenty-first century, I worked as an editorial assistant for a journal whose proofreading methods were not unlike the Lawyer's. When he and his scriveners need to check that they have accurately copied a document, they "assist each other in this examination, one reading from the copy, the other holding the original" (20). The method is sometimes called copy-holding. Since it was a reflection on our shared work history that brought me to this line of thinking about Bartleby, I'll risk dilating momentarily on my own little history of scrivening.[13]

At the journal I worked for, when the galley proofs of each issue were back from the compositor, the two assistants would sit at a table in the anteroom of the editorial office to check galleys against typescript. Positioned, not unlike the Lawyer, behind an acousmatic screen (that is, in an adjoining room, around the corner of an open door frame), our managing editor could hear us drone "word by word" (20) through each article, epigraph to end-notes, voicing every punctuation mark and formatting shift in a specialized shorthand: *com*, *point*, *cap*, *ital, paren*. Several hours a day, our routine was: read, listen, hydrate, and—"Ah!"—deploy the proofing pencil on an inadvertently italicized comma. It took about a week to get through an issue. It felt longer. Sometimes, on my turns to read aloud, I tried to make up that difference, the difference between clock time and duration, by spitting out block quotes in half a breath, hawking page ranges like an auctioneer. I was, in other words, the kind of substandard proofreader who, per an 1895 article in *The American*

Bookmaker, "frequently falls into a glib and unintelligible singing which no one standing by can understand" ("The Copy-Holder" 107). The tactic sometimes backfired, anyway. My vocal cords were not conditioned for the pace. I'd soon have to beg off reading for the rest of the day. I bet my colleague was annoyed by this hurrying-up-to-wait, this speeding to death. But a sense of solidarity always seemed available in the wheeze of a word that collated the whole experience, the "very dull, wearisome, and lethargic affair" which surely would have been so allergenic to "sanguine temperaments" like Lord Byron's (*Piazza Tales* 20), but which I, somehow, rather enjoyed: *proofs*.

Readings of Bartleby's refusals usually gloss over the fact that proofreading is the first task he refuses (20), and also the second (21), and also the third (24). He continues to copy documents until somewhat later in the story, after refusing a few other tasks (running to the post office, placing his finger while the lawyer ties his knot). When they do recognize a distinction between copying and copy-holding, what critics glean from it is often subordinated to a more global comment on structures of representation, contextualized in terms of a social, aesthetic, or philosophical critique.[14] In moving so quickly to interpret the function of proofreading, though, we may lose sight of something significant about the practice of copy-holding. Described from this angle, the task does not look like an incidental starting point for Bartleby's series of refusals. Whereas the copying of a text is necessarily asynchronous with its writing (and one can copy at one's own pace, alone, "absolutely alone" [32]), proofreading, when done in the way of the scriveners and of my old job, requires—or rather, assumes—a lockstep of readerly action. In its coordination of two workers, the job sets its own clock: the one reading aloud sets the pace and the other is carried along (if sometimes to wearisome effect because their colleague is trying to read too fast).

Henri Bergson offers a famous illustration of synchronous experience: waiting for sugar to dissolve in water. He writes that the "time I have to wait" is not the same as clock time but "coincides with my impatience, that is to say, with a certain portion of my own duration, which I cannot protract or contract as I like." The temporal mixture of melting and waiting, material process and apperceptual affect, "is no longer a relation, it is an absolute" (10). "For the impatient coffee or tea drinker," Elizabeth Grosz elaborates, "it is the failure of everything to be given at once" (198). In *Moby-Dick*, when the harpooneers sit down at the cabin table, they are not impatient for coffee or tea, but for food. It is Dough-Boy's job to bring it. Sometimes he is slow. So Tashtego comes up with a "way of accelerating him by darting a fork at his back, harpoon-wise" (152). This is the element that complicates Bergson's example: other people, other speeds. What Bartleby refuses in copy-holding is not just working

simultaneously or working speedily, but the absolute relation of working at the same speed.

From here we can imagine new ways of describing Bartleby's other refusals. Consider the sixth task that he prefers not to do, in the Lawyer's report: helping to tie a knot. "Now and then, in the eagerness of dispatching pressing business, I would inadvertently summon Bartleby, in a short, rapid tone, to put his finger, say, on the incipient tie of a bit of red tape with which I was about compressing some papers" (26). One could integrate this, too, in an allegory of mimesis. Instead of the baroque hermeneutic knot tossed overboard in "Benito Cereno" (76), here we have the knot that is supposed to unite ("compress," anyway) the text, and it never gets tied. We get elsewhere, though, by attending to the particular practice in question. Placing a finger for, say, a square knot or a bow is a delicate interaction. You need to keep your finger there long enough that the line does not go slack as the person holding the ends of the string begins to bring them up and back around toward each other. But you also need to get yourself out of the way before they tighten the knot into the flesh of your digit. This will not involve serious injury; the kind of string (or ribbon or "red tape") meant to go around a stack of papers is not going to take off your finger, much less your limb or your "entire body" (*Moby-Dick* 279). You will not be made a Mazeppa of (281). The risk is simply that the "incipient tie" may need to be loosened again, the sequence reset. Still: there is something in this operation, in the charged moment when "the line swiftly straighten[s]" (412), of those same demands of attunement and response that Stubb elides when he advises Pip never to jump.

We could perhaps make a case that several other of Bartleby's refused tasks involve synchronous interaction—going to the post office on a quick errand, maybe (25); serving as an intermediary between other officemates, maybe (25)—but I will not lean too hard on each instance. He ends up refusing copying and all sorts of other asynchronous labor as well. We do not have to globalize the claim, though, to recognize its traction at the moment he starts saying the thing he always says. Just because he would, eventually, prefer neither to *go faster* nor to *keep up* does not mean there are not real differences of social relation, of affective response, entailed by the two imperatives. If one outcome of extreme acceleration is an image of "wild simultaneousness" or "perfect stillness," the name for the perpetuation of that state, the extension of simultaneousness in continuous sequence, might be wild synchrony. It only happens "now and then" (the phrase that appears in the Lawyer's narration when he first asks Bartleby to proofread and also when he asks for his finger) but it also happens both now and then: at A, at B, and all along the differential slope of acceleration or deceleration in between.[15]

Length

On 3 June 1856 Boston's *Daily Evening Traveler* reviewed *The Piazza Tales*, offering a brief recap of "Bartleby": the scrivener's "ghost-like taciturnity becomes at length such an annoyance . . . till he has at length to be forced from the place. The quaint explanation of his extraordinary silence comes at length" (quoted in Inge 39). Someone has found a phrase that works for them. The first two instances of "at length" refer to the slow, persistent unfolding of Bartleby's passive resistance. The third pivots from the length of reported events to the structure of the Lawyer's telling, to the fact of the deferral of the sequel, or, as the distinction is sometimes termed in narrative theory, from story time to discourse time. It is apt that length marks that pivot point.

Like speed, length both names a whole metric spectrum, from very short to very long, and can connote a particular intensity or range of that spectrum; just as "speedy" means very fast, "lengthy" may mean too long. A rather lengthy story in its two installments, "Bartleby" tests the limits of Edgar Allan Poe's exhortation, seven years earlier, that a text of the "proper *length*" (35, emphasis in original) is one that's readable in "a single sitting" (34). In contrast to Poe's suggestion that the number of lines in a text can be reliably connected to the duration of its reader's experience, Gérard Genette reminds us that "reading time varies" and therefore "no one can measure the duration of a narrative" (86). This is a fundamental premise in Genette's analysis of "connections between the variable *duration* of . . . story sections and the pseudo-duration (in fact, length of text) of their telling in the narrative—connections, thus, of speed" (35).

But the concept of length (as well as *longeur*) resists the fixation of its meaning as a spatial fact that saves our calculations from the fluctuations of narrative duration. Whereas speed, in its primary modern sense, names a determinate relationship between space and time, length confuses them. It can name either or both. Take the calculation of nautical speed by means of log and line (a technique to which Ahab resorts after breaking his quadrant [*Moby-Dick* 520]): one divides the length of line paid out, marked by knots, by the length of time elapsed. Speed equals length over length. Or take the huge, precisely-timed paper machine in "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (which happens to be attended by a worker of precisely the Lawyer's age: "rather . . . elderly"); when the narrator describes his amazement "at the elongation, interminable convolutions, and deliberate slowness of the machine" (*Piazza Tales* 332), this "elongation" seems to attach both to its

physical convolutions and to its slowness. Or, finally, take the two references to "lengthy" documents copied by Bartleby (20, 23), the content of whose length (number of lines? minutes to read aloud? thickness of loose leaves?) depends on the relevant practice—copying, copy-holding, bundling.

The point I am making here about the spatiotemporal confusion of length may seem semantic. It is. But Melville's fiction also points to the operation of this confusion at the level of experience. It does so not by anticipating Einsteinian special relativity but rather by attending to modes of practice, the ways that work happens, the speeds at which it happens, the affects that attend it. Of such modes, those that have emerged in most meaningful connection in my own reading (I do not imagine this list to be exhaustive) are sequence, simultaneousness, and synchrony. If the first two are complex elements of Melville's linguistic experimentation, the third, expressing a particular relation between them, is a feature of the practical world, a specific condition of labor, that Bartleby refuses by deferring.

The slowness of that refusal might direct us toward questions about close reading and literary form.[16] (I think I hear Viktor Shklovsky clearing his throat in the anteroom.[17]) The problem of speed in "Bartleby" also interweaves, though, with some long continuities of social response to the temporalities of industrialized modernity. There are limits to such continuities, of course. Often historians point to the turn of the twentieth century, not to mention the twenty-first, as a moment when the very idea of speed underwent radical change, as the corollary of a "new political economy of capitalism" accompanied by "an altered culture of time, and space" (Soja 26). But if those alterations snap the line between the Lawyer's Wall Street and our own, we might still identify sites at which the figure of Bartleby productively recurs—not simply as a paragon of political resistance or social dissent (as many studies and popular representations have long called him into service, with and for good reason), but more particularly as a figure of spatiotemporal anomaly. We might look, for instance, from "Bartleby" to forms of labor deceleration including both contemporaneous tactics of enslaved people in "slowing the line" (Berlin 11) and the twentieth-century union strategy of the slow-down, which usually requires some synchrony—that is, a coordinated temporal prolongation—to be effective (Hammett et al. 126). We might consider the relationship between affect, efficiency, and length (including "attention span") in the discourse about those amphetamine compounds that would, in the mid-twentieth century, come to be called "speed" and whose direct descendants today dominate the pharmaceutical market for attention disorders. Benzedrine sulfate was, in one of its earliest trials in 1936, tested

in a population of hospital employees, one of whom reported the following on a questionnaire about how the stimulant affected their workday: "I have done things today I usually dislike but which I rather enjoyed doing today."[18] A fine, unnerving tagline for a "Bartleby" sequel.

And we might, too, look from "Bartleby" to the histories of artistic practice that lead up to and out of works like Oliveros's meditations. The same edition of *Sonic Meditations* that I began with includes a second version of "One Word," which runs as follows: "Choose a word. Listen to it mentally. Slowly and gradually begin to voice this word by allowing each tiny part of it to sound extremely prolonged. Repeat for a long time."[19] This version of "One Word" involves fewer explicit shifts of speed (though Oliveros does introduce acceleration and deceleration in further sub-variations of the score). Instead it emphasizes the transformation of length: slowness gets spatialized as gradation; the tiny gets prolonged; time elongates. Oliveros does not specify when "it stops" except implicitly, as a matter of one's judgment of what has been a "long time." My argument has been that Melville describes such judgments not only as a function of subjective preference but also of localized contexts of practice—so localized that, in this variation of Sonic Meditation XII, what feels like a long time might depend on a writerly choice: which word?

Notes

[1] The 1974 edition of *Sonic Meditations* includes two versions of entry XII on separate, unnumbered pages; here I cite the first version. In 1971 the magazine *Source* published an initial set of Oliveros's meditations, which went up to XI.

[2] If, that is, they were hired. One could perhaps take "work" as intentional here (and not a typographical error) in the sense of a work of art, since, in any given performance, the set of sounds in the chosen word will be coextensive with the set of sounds "in this work"; but the gesture, while logically consistent, strikes me as tonally improbable in the context of the meditations.

[3] Readers of Genette may justly hear an echo here of his remark that "distortions of speed contribute to emancipation from narrative temporality quite as much as transgressions of chronological order do" (85), though I draw from Melville a sense of speed that differs from Genette's (and though my principal interest here is not narratological); my section headings also mirror, and quickly diverge from, the chapters of *Narrative Discourse*, beginning with my "Sequence" to its "Order."

[4] "The usual formula would instead be *I had rather not*," suggests Deleuze (68).

[5] Hurh's reading of the *Piazza Tales* sets this spatial play (Bartleby's immobility, the Lawyer's roaming) against the temporal themes of other stories in the collection (215, 219). See also Dayan on the legal and literary meanings of Bartleby's occupation of space.

[6] Thanks to Alexis Lowry for drawing my attention to Bury's work.

[7] See Edwards 65. Also see Bryant's illuminating reading of Melville's revisions to this passage (esp. 169). On queer and non-linear temporality in Melville's fiction see both Looby and Stein.

[8] "Stillness is not monolithic immobility," writes Fretwell, "but the anticipatory experience of lying on the cusp of movement" (580).

[9] On *Typee*'s ethnographic temporalities, also see Elliott.

[10] See Weinstein's reading of *An American Tragedy*, in which "the narrator calls attention to things happening at the same time without the characters knowing it" (102).

[11] Mirroring this concern about thinking through too many things at the same time, Melville sent editor Evert Duyckinck a facetious request on 13 December 1850 for "about fifty fast-writing youths . . . because since I have been here I have planned about that number of future works & cant find enough time to think about them separately" (*Correspondence*, 174).

[12] As Rigal has remarked in her reading of photographic speed in *Moby-Dick*, a "shock of acceleration" can also be embedded within the "spiralized unfolding" that is repetitive or cyclical experience (112). On temporal recursion in Melville's poetry, see Hsu and Marrs, ch. 3.

[13] The phrase "little history" is the Lawyer's (4) and also Faflik's in a recent article on *Israel Potter*.

[14] Marx, for instance, reads Bartleby's refusal to verify his copy as a protest of property relations as instantiated in title deeds (609); Arsić as a comment on testimonial reproduction (142); and Hurh as a philosophical denial of error or self-difference (in Kierkegaardian terms) (221). See also Cohen (esp. 169) on scrivening and mimesis, though, unlike the above, he does not account for proofreading as distinct from copying.

[15] On the phrase "now and then," see, again, Weinstein's chapter on Dreiser (83–107).

[16] My attention throughout this essay to the "forms" of practice (especially practices involving lines) is influenced by Otter's argument, in an essay I first read while copy-holding, that, in the chapter of *Moby-Dick* on "The Line," "Melville's narrator considers the dynamics of form and response in ways that resonate with our debates about aesthetic ideology" (122).

[17] "The technique of art," Shklovsky writes, "is to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (12).

[18] Nathanson 529. See Rasmussen on the longer pharmaceutical history of amphetamines. See also van Zuylen's recent defense of distraction (and concomitant query about the social values subtending pharmaceutical attention regulation), from the perspective of philosophical and literary traditions of slow and "Bartleby-like" (35) rumination.

[19] This second version of "One Word," also listed as entry XII, is included under the heading "Sonic Meditations XII-XXV."

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