The Scandal of Insensibility; or, The Bartleby Problem

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IN THE FIRST PART OF *LEVIATHAN*, "OF MAN," BEFORE HOBBES DEFINES a commonwealth and prophesies the philosophical "Kingdome of Darknesse" into which it can descend (956), he proclaims that "to have no Desire, is to be Dead" (110). As a motto for the passions, the phrase resonates as a defense of desire, a call to understand strong feelings as on the side of life. To have no desire is to be dead or as good as dead. Of course, in Hobbes's philosophy, it means to be clinically dead, since life is defined as a state of motion, and desires (into which all passions can be distilled) are "the Interiour Beginnings of Voluntary Motions," the very first stirrings of action that move us either toward objects that are good for us or away from objects that are bad (78). In opposition to a scholastic view of sense perceptions as taking place within the immaterial soul, Hobbes redefined all interior responses (thoughts *and* feelings) as physical movements. Put simply, emotions are motions. As Thomas Spragens writes, "Not only are the passions motions, in Hobbes's view, but cognition also can be conceived as a form of motion. That is, the intellectual faculties as well as the emotional strivings of living creatures are, at bottom, nothing but motion" (71).[1] In this ontology of life, cognition, emotion, and action are continuous and inseparable phenomena. Thus, what I am calling insensibility—the absence of interior motions, or feelings, that arrests the possibility of action—would appear impossible to conceive except as death. "For there is no such thing as perpetuall Tranquility of mind," writes Hobbes, "because Life it selfe is but Motion, and can never be without Desire, nor without Feare, no more than without Sense" (*Leviathan* 96). Susan James observes that for Hobbes "we can never be without a susceptibility to passion," and "[w]hen the internal motions that are our appetites and aversions cease, we die, and become corpses rather than human beings"

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(131), making apparent the tautological thrust of the saying that "to have no Desire, is to be Dead."[2] To cease feeling desire (including its negative form, aversion) is to cease feeling anything at all, to stop distinguishing what will help from what will hurt you and thus to become not only a physical corpse but—in a Hobbesian world where one must always be on the move—a social casualty as well.

But if feeling is moving, and moving is living, how can we account for those who do not move and who are thus, according to a Hobbesian physics, not themselves moved? If an unmoving body is by definition a dead one, then what do we do in the face of an immobile subject, who should not be alive to begin with and should certainly not be alive for long? And if those who do not act do not feel, then why does insensibility—the conflation of inaction and unfeeling—seem like an all-out form of hostility, both an action and emotion expressing the deepest contempt? To tackle the riddle of the insensible, we need to understand immobility through the unlikely lens of force, an approach made possible by Hobbes's theory of motion and epitomized in literary history by Herman Melville's tale of an "unmoving" scrivener. Insensibility, or the Bartleby problem, this essay argues, reaches back to the difficulty in Western philosophy of conceptualizing the relay between interior and exterior, feeling and action, in and across bodies. Recent debates in affect studies about whether emotions are intentional or nonintentional states return us to Hobbes and his underrecognized philosophy of the passions, which he conceived as extensive with intentions but also as subject to unpredictable relations of force. Moreover, reviving an Enlightenment discourse of the passions—and its narrative definitions of emotions in relation to activity and passivity, benefit and injury, pleasure and pain—is, perhaps surprisingly, not to return to a tired landscape between reason and feeling but instead to revive the *question* of emotions, to ask again what exactly they are and what purposes they serve. And although, for reasons contested in the history of philosophy, literary studies has largely inherited the "nasty, brutish, and short" view of Hobbes's ideas (*Leviathan* 192), his theories of motion remain a rich, if not foundational, source of thinking on sense and the problem of human interiority.[3]

My essay is invested in the primacy of a nonnarrative figure in a narrative theory of emotions. If feelings are situations that unfold over time, then an inquiry concerning insensibility asks what an immobile subject is doing at the heart of that process. Here I am engaging a troubling distinction between narrative and nonnarrative phenomena that emerges in the debate sparked by Ruth Leys's critique of affect theory ("Turn," "Critical Response II," "Critical Response III"). In one exchange, a central division between cognitive and noncognitive experience maps onto a more subtle difference between what Charles Altieri describes as action-oriented "emotions" and perception-oriented "feelings." Emotions, he writes in response to Leys, "lead agents to shape experience in terms of plots with points of incitement leading to projected action." By contrast, feelings apply principally to the realm of "aesthetic" experience, as "states of sensation that involve the imagination but that do not enter into the structure of cause and consequence because the state of attention becomes an end in itself" (880). The difference Altieri sketches between action and perception or emotion and feeling relies on an implicit binary between narrative and aesthetic experience or emplotment and nonemplotment ("end in itself"). However, these distinctions fail to register in earlier discussions of the passions, where sense and imagination are precisely theorized as causes of action. What Altieri calls "feelings," or "state[s] of attention," would for earlier philosophers need to be explained through an account of motion, even as that account includes or even relies on the possibility of nonaction. For theorists still

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working through Aristotle's ideas about the motivational qualities of reason and desire, mental states "that involve the imagination but that," Altieri posits, "do not enter into the structure of cause and consequence" would be hard to conceive since states of imagination must precisely explain the structure of causation, or how the experience of objects translates into subjective motion. Furthermore, the idea of any state as an end in itself would, under the transformative influence of Galileo, assume a teleological cast, a model of the universe fundamentally at odds with the new physics of continuous motion.

The difference between action-oriented emotions and unmotivated (non-plot-driven) feelings evokes a traditional distinction between passivity and activity, or passion and action—a binary that Hobbes (and his contemporary Descartes) sought to explain as a single phenomenon, as what Hobbes calls "this progress of causation that is of action and passion" (*Elements of Philosophy* 124).[4] Feelings, I am arguing, cannot in this context be understood outside narrative since they are themselves stories of causes and consequences, agents and patients.[5] And yet narrative can be seen to hinge on the unlikely, nonnarrative figure of the insensible—unlikely because without feelings, there would seem to be no motion, no event, and no relation to unfold. How does insensibility come then to incite narrative, as if only a figure of immobility could prompt an investigation of inner life? In what follows, I discuss the physical conundrum of impassivity in Hobbes's theory of resistance and trace its resonances in contemporary affect theory. In turning to Adam Smith's supremely unsympathetic portrait of an insensible, I then show how such figuration changes the ontological problem of immobility into a social crisis. Finally, in taking up Melville's classic text, I argue that the scandal of the insensible returns us to the philosophical notion of an unmovable mover, reminding us why theories of motion (emotion and narrative) are always and only made possible by the appearance of an unfeeling, unmoving being.

Inertia and the Force of Resistance

In conceiving of emotion as the beginning of action, Hobbes redefined suffering as material impingement, part of the cosmological order of cause and effect where an "agent" is a body "said to work upon or *act*, that is to say, *do* something to another body" and a "patient" is a body "said to *suffer*, that is, to have something *done* to it by another body" (*Elements of Philosophy* 120). The example he offers is the warming of the hand by fire, where the hand is said to "suffer" the action of the fire. While the "passion" of the patient is technically a state of suffering, "suffering" describes simply the experience of the effect of the action imposed by another body.[6] The passion of suffering thus illustrates more the unfolding of a structural relation of subject and object than a dolorous predicament of pain. And yet this relation—the doing of something or the "hav[ing] something *done* to it" by another body—gives rise to a particularly conflictual scene of emotions, one in which even immobility is implicated.

Hobbes reinterpreted liberty not as the reaching of a specific goal but instead as the experience of unimpeded motion, a condition foreclosed by the fact of endless and inherent resistance against the motion of others. His theory of inertia, a "sweeping transformation" in the historical conception of movement, reframed the meaning of immobility through a narrative about force (Spragens 57). Inertia, formulated by Galileo as the tendency of any body to resist change to its course and velocity, describes the property whereby either an unmoving object remains still or a moving object continues its course until it meets with an interference. Rest is thus not the telos or fulfillment of motion; instead, both motion and rest are changes of

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state caused by the exertion of other bodies. As Spragens writes of Hobbes's theory, "'Rest' was purely a relative situation, and it came about in a moving body only through the imposition of an external force" (176–77). States of motion therefore describe how one body begets the motion or change in motion of another body. Even if a body is at rest, it came to rest by the force of something else.

Two kinds of dynamics are at work in Hobbes's physics: a movement inward and a movement against. When in Hobbes's scheme a subject senses an object, the motion of that object radiates from the outside to the inside of the sentient body: "For when the uttermost part of the organ is pressed, it no sooner yields, but the part next within it is pressed also; and, in this manner, the pressure or motion is propagated through all the parts of the organ to the innermost" (*Elements of Philosophy* 390). Moving begins by being moved, touching by being touched. Feeling in this account would appear equivalent to yielding, to a state of being "pressed" one layer at a time until the motion of the object reaches one's "innermost" part. And yet Hobbes clearly regards feeling as the meeting of force with force—in other words, as an active state of resistance. Thus, the experience of the motion of other bodies is always an experience of "contrary" motion. As James, quoting *The Elements of Philosophy*, writes, "A human body does not passively receive the motions caused in it by external objects; it also resists or reacts 'by reason of its own internal natural motion'" (128; *Elements of Philosophy* 391). Here human bodies do not vibrate sympathetically with the motions of foreign bodies. Unlike the transfer of or identification with others' emotions described in later accounts of sympathy, Hobbesian sensibility involves an essential barrier to and negotiation of others' powers to move us. Hobbes thereby closes the loop between feeling and unfeeling, or motion and immobility, somehow equating the action of self-preservation with the traction of resistance. As one historian records, Hobbes advanced the claim that "like any other physical action, resistance is also motion" (Leijenhorst 89). Even if Hobbes's principle of resistance seems more remote to us than the rhetoric of fellow feeling that emerged in reaction to his ideas, we are hardly far from his views of the senses.[7] A psychological understanding of emotions retains the basic assumptions that actions originate from deep inside us, that those interior states are responses to social and material situations and that such responses can register conflict, if not violation, of subjectivity.

Much of contemporary affect theory similarly interprets emotions through the charged grid of intersubjective relations, where "affect," according to Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth's now commonly cited introductory essay, is "synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*." Just as Hobbes understood all bodies as both moving and moved, as acting and being acted on, Gregg and Seigworth express the central inquiry of affect theory this way: "How does a body, marked in its duration by these various encounters with mixed forces, come to shift its affections (its being-affected) into action (capacity to affect)?" (2). Affect theory would thus appear to inherit from earlier philosophy a set of concerns about the movements between bodies, the relation of passivity and activity, and the seemingly unavoidable structure of interior and exterior—terms that render emotions invisible transactions as well as worldly actions, both motions of recognition and countermotions of unseen resistance.

The Contemptuous Insensible

The story of insensibility expresses how the problem of interiority is a problem about other people's interiority. Because one cannot guess what insensibles feel, there is no way of knowing what they will do. The reverse is also true: because insensibles do not move, there is

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no way of knowing what or, more important, whether they feel. The unmoving, unfeeling subject challenges the model of emotions as causes, as accounts of how a moved body moves. Insensibility would thus appear immune to narration (no effect and therefore no cause), and yet the passionate scene of its occurrence reveals the surprising impact of an unmoving body. In the philosophy of emotions, the scene of insensibility is played out in the story of contempt, an affectless affect that flickers throughout *Leviathan*. Hobbes, in an early chapter delineating the variety of emotions that stem from the primary states of appetites and aversions, acknowledges a condition explicitly void of the passions, a living immobility in which one exerts neither force nor counterforce: "Those things which we neither Desire, nor Hate, we are said to *Contemn*: CONTEMPT being nothing else but an immobility, or contumacy of the Heart, in resisting the action of certain things" (80). A state in which we do not experience desire or hate, in which we perceive but do not move toward or away from an object, would seem to defy Hobbes's ontological vision of life, in which bodies are constantly reacting to the motion of other bodies for the sake of keeping themselves intact. For a moment in Hobbes's philosophy, "perpetual tranquility of mind" seems possible, an instance of dispassion, inaction—but only for a moment. Hobbes immediately construes such "immobility" as resistance, a "contumacy of the heart" that reacts to "something" by willfully stopping its own motion.

Yet, unlike Hobbes's theory of inertia, in which a body comes to rest by the force of another body, the subject of contempt is responsible for his own immobility. If an object fails to move someone, it is the fault of the unmovable someone. To be unmoved by an object is simply to be against it, to be full of hard feelings instead of empty of all feelings. Hobbes's *Elements of Law*, for example, posits the "contrary of pity" not as its absence but as a "HARDNESS of heart, proceeding either from slowness of imagination, or from extreme great opinion of [one's] own exemption of the like calamity, or from hatred of all, or most men" (40). An ostensibly neutral state of pitiless indifference, in which someone does not move you, becomes an active state of hostility, in which you are a combination of dull, deluded, self-regarding, and hateful. (Other synonyms for *contempt* are "contumely" and "impudence" [234, 90].) Hobbes's description turns immobility—the state of having no voluntary, interior motions—into passion. Such a ready conversion of impassivity into hatred anticipates similar gestures in the history of affect—a hermeneutic impulse to make literal sense of insensibility. After defining contempt as immobility toward an object, Hobbes immediately hedges that such a state may reflect a "[h]eart [that] is already moved otherwise, by other more potent objects; or from want of experience of them" (80). Thus, instead of dwelling on the enigma of what it would mean not to feel, Hobbes shifts the emphasis to a state of preference or ignorance, to feeling nothing toward a specific object.

My claim is not that insensibility is a single, coherently understood state that poses problems for the ontology of emotions as the interior origins of human agency. Rather, I am arguing that the event of nonresponsiveness exhausts this model, eliciting the illogical charge of an absence of motion that exerts force, an immobility that also applies what Hobbes calls "counter-pressure" (*Leviathan* 22). Through his ontology of the passions, we have come to understand stillness or inaction as the result of force and to imagine the response to force as taking the form of resistance. The immobile body must under this rubric be understood as having moved before and as movable still. Immobility is not itself controversial. The scandal arises when stillness does not result from force, as if the living subject had never moved. Such a situation refuses to corroborate not only a theory

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of passion as motion but the definition of life itself, illustrated, for example, by Descartes's claim that the "difference between a living body and a dead body" is purely motion (220).

The nonnarrative phenomenon of immobility, in which there is no motivation, action, or interaction, becomes a story through the charge of insensibility. The construction of a culpably resistant subject turns the philosophical or physical problem of stillness into an interpersonal conflict as well as an investigation of character, replacing the ontological riddle of what feeling is with the narrative question of who it is, as well as the ethical quandary of what to do with it. The insensible as the subject who has never moved initiates a desperate search for signs of interior motion and a corresponding narrative of persuasion, coercion, seduction, and persecution all bound, of course, to fail. The insensible does not, will not, and never did move, feel—an intolerable situation, as made clear by Smith, who takes up Hobbes's touchstone of contempt.

Where for Hobbes the insensible is understood as having contempt *for* others, Smith relates how the insensible draws the contempt *of* others—not the objects of contempt, but the third parties to the scene of emotions who feature so prominently in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith's chapter "Of the Unsocial Passions" begins with a fight. One man has provoked another into hating him, and Smith describes how we come not just to sympathize but, indeed, to "applaud" and "delight" in the man's animosity (35, 34). Initially, he explains, our sympathy is split between the hater and the hated since "our fear for what the one may suffer, damps our resentment for what the other has suffered." To tip the balance of our fellow feeling, the injured party must render his hostility "graceful and agreeable," demonstrating "his patience, his mildness, his humanity" in the face of harm (34). Forbearance yields sympathy, as gentleness puts such an agreeable face on bad feelings that resentment "may be admitted to be even generous and noble" (38). The more likable the victim, the more keenly we feel for his injury (34). So when the victim's forbearance finally breaks, we are licensed to "rejoice to see him attack in his turn," to soak in the fullest pleasures of punishment, "as if the injury had been done to [our]selves" (35). That said, his forbearance must break.

Smith clarifies, "A person becomes contemptible who tamely sits still and submits to insults, without attempting either to repel or to revenge them. We cannot enter into his indifference and insensibility: we call his behaviour mean-spiritedness, and are as really provoked by it as by the insolence of his adversary" (34–35). Submission is not, in fact, an acceptable response to harm; the insulted party must react. Insensibility—an indifference denoted by inaction—alienates a willingly, indeed, eagerly sympathetic public and denies it the pleasures of emotional experience, whether sadness in distress or glee in vengeance. As Smith observes, "It is always disagreeable to feel that we cannot sympathize" (16). By contrast, the unsocial passions of hatred and resentment may appear difficult to share, but, if "brought down" to an agreeable pitch, they become perfectly sympathetic. For Smith, the difference between bad feeling and unfeeling centers in this formulation: negative emotions may challenge sympathy, but insensibility obstructs it. Where, for example, raw hatred can be tempered into honorable indignation, thus paving the way for shared hostility, nothing can be done with unfeeling ("[w]e cannot enter into" it). And for Smith's "impartial spectator," who exists precisely to be moved out of his impartiality, to be left feeling nothing is inconceivably worse than to enjoy the chance of feeling bad.

In the arena of public feelings, Smith suggests, insensibility spoils emotional play for all, which is why it amounts to a public offense instead of just a personal insult. Moreover, because insensibility is so intransitive (it denies the existence of objects), it cannot be

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recognized as a state of mind (there is no relation, no interpersonal space to "enter into"). It would thus appear that unfeeling does *not* beget feeling since it disables the circuits of sympathy that allow emotions to circulate among subject, object, and observer. What does prove to be so powerfully emotional, however, is its provocation ("we call his behaviour mean-spiritedness, and are as really provoked by it as by the insolence of his adversary"). For Smith, the insult of insensibility reflects the fact that sentiments derive more from external than from internal pressures: "We should resent more from a sense of the propriety of resentment, from a sense that mankind expect and require it of us, than because we feel in ourselves the furies of that disagreeable passion" (38). Insensibility counts less as a failure to preserve oneself, as in Hobbes's view, than as a dismissal of the proprieties of feeling, of what "mankind expect and require" of its own species. Consequently, far from cauterizing sympathy, unfeeling comes to unite others in their resentment, even and perhaps especially in those who have no apparent stake in the conflict.

Contemporary affect theorists have picked up on the menace of contempt and the dysphoric turn that unfeeling can take. William Miller in *The Anatomy of Disgust*, for example, associates the "intensely political" structure of Hobbesian contempt with a cluster of negative emotions like "loathing, horror, disgust, hatred, cruelty" (207, 215)—affects that appear to draw on the alternative definition posed by Hobbes of "*Contempt*, or little sense of the calamity of others, [as] that which men call Cruelty" (*Leviathan* 90). Sianne Ngai, engaging Miller's reading, emphasizes the essential condition of indifference expressed by Hobbesian contempt, enlisting it as an "ugly feeling," more like "contemptuous tolerance" than disgust (336). Like Smith's, these accounts work by implicitly constructing an insensible figure, someone who does not care and whose carelessness hurts others. The creation of a character within a story about the injuries caused by unfeeling initiates the slide from the philosophical possibility of senselessness to the social misdemeanor of cruelty—not simply not feeling but not feeling *enough* for "the calamity of others." As Ngai observes, the subject of Hobbesian contempt, he who dismisses others as "[t]oo weak or insignificant to pose any sort of danger," comes himself to pose danger, to threaten the peace of others with his indifference (336).[8] Where Miller sees Hobbes as "clear that . . . contempt is a passion, not simply the absence of affect" (214), I regard "the absence of affect" itself as neither clear nor simple in the case of contempt.

Insensibility is a social predicament that reiterates basic questions raised by Hobbesian contempt: Is inaction a kind of action? Does immobility express resistance? Can bad feeling take the form of unfeeling? Thus, even as the problem of insensibility migrates to a tale of provocation, it always returns to the mystery of insensible subjectivity, to the immobility of the heart glimpsed by Hobbes (before being ruled inadmissible) or to the paradox, in John Keats's formulation, of "the feel of not to feel." This, the Bartleby problem, recapitulates both the philosophical question of how a person lives if he does not move as well as the ethical challenge of recognizing or tolerating such a being.

Living without Dining

The insensible perhaps most familiar to literary critics is a law clerk on Wall Street who stands behind a screen and prefers not to. Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" (1853) features a "motionless young man" whose impassivity sends the narrator, the lawyer who employs him, into a tailspin that ends in uncanny communion with his copyist's dead hand (19). As in Hobbes's account, Melville's story defines emotion as physical motion, equating motionlessness

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with emotionlessness.[9] Bartleby is "singularly sedate"; he "moved not a limb" and "refuses to budge" (19, 31, 38). Can he not or *will* he not move? The inscrutability of the scrivener's mind is premised on the immobility of his body. If he does not move—"*he was always there*," "he never went any where"—then what does he feel in "those dead-wall reveries of his" (26, 28, 29)? Melville's fiction elaborates the predicament of insensibility gleaned by Hobbes, the puzzle of unmotivated action, or what happens when life proceeds without interior motion. Like Hobbesian contempt, the scrivener's impassivity would appear to reflect his inexperience of either aversion or desire. But impartiality can denote force, an act of defiance or protest more disruptive than anger—but against whom or what? And how could Bartleby make such a demonstration if what is at issue is his very lack of motivation (to do anything)? Bartleby's "great stillness" somehow comes across as "point-blank" refusal, an internal resistance literalized when the lawyer tries to open the door but finds the keyhole "resisted by something inserted from the inside" (26, 25).

The problem with Bartleby is not simply that he shows no feelings but that he fails to recognize the encounter that produces them—the demands, in other words, that the motions of one body produce on another. While the lawyer construes his clerk's sudden policy of inaction as proceeding from some inscrutable directive from within, it is hard to say what interiority would even mean if it no longer referred to a space of responsiveness where one negotiates, resists, or otherwise processes external objects. The clerk's signature impassivity involves neither an advance toward a beneficial object nor a retreat from a harmful one. As Bartleby tells the lawyer, "I like to be stationary" (41). But without evidence of either desire or aversion, no interior motion can be said to take place, and life cannot be said to exist. The anorexia that presumably kills him (he refuses to take dinner from the "grub-man" Mr. Cutlets [43]) reinforces a fundamental absence of desire (*an-*, "without," and *orexis*, "appetite"). To stop eating ("I prefer not to dine to-day," he specifies [44]) is to halt ingestion, the taking in of substance that is the most basic, fetal gesture of responsiveness. The lawyer's obsession with Bartleby's diet (there is evidence of cheese and cake, but no one sees him *eating*) captures how answering the question of what or whether Bartleby eats will attest to his sensibility, or susceptibility to other bodies. Meditating on his staple of ginger nuts, the lawyer fantasizes a "hot and spicy" Bartleby—an active organism made of wildly motile parts (23). But without proof of his actual digestive practices (of catching him in the act of internal motion), the scrivener's capacity for action remains unconfirmed. Thus, Bartleby cannot be "made to move" since there would be nothing *to* move, no matter the location of his body (behind a screen, in a yard, or being carted down Wall Street "in his pale unmoving way" [42]). The evacuation of volition implied by Bartleby's motionlessness collapses the distinction between voluntary and involuntary motion (what Hobbes calls "vitall" motions, or biological functions that take place without our awareness such as breathing, the circulation of blood, and digestion [*Leviathan* 78]).[10]

The lawyer's futile search for Bartleby's vital signs indicates a disrupted relation between surface and depth, an aberration evident in the open-eyed cadaver his clerk leaves behind. On the soft grass of the prison yard, "wasted" with "knees drawn up," lies the body of the scrivener, but it bears no mark of injury or trauma (44). There is no bruise attesting to the circulation of blood, only the slow violence of emaciation—a starkness of form that had long characterized his "cadaverous" appearance and manners (27, 30, 35). Although interpretations of Melville's text often focus on the significance of Bartleby's demise, the more salient question is not whether he dies at the end of the story

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but why he was thought to be living before. In other words, if the body of Bartleby is now pronounced dead, then what did it mean for it to be alive? "Won't he dine to-day, either? Or does he live without dining?" Mr. Cutlets asks of the corpse. "Lives without dining," pronounces the lawyer, who closes its eyes. Is it the deceased or living incarnation of Bartleby who lives without dining, moves without being moved? Even though the scrivener's early days at the office evinced a certain hyperactivity (a flurry of copying in which "he seemed to gorge himself on my documents"), the lawyer's detail that "[t]here was no pause for digestion" indicates the same absence of interior motion—eating without digesting being equivalent to living without dining (19).

Bartleby's cessation of action (retirement from copying means he no longer moves even his hands) raises the question of what *made* him stop moving. As the theory of inertia makes clear, bodies do not come to rest by themselves, but rest is the result of having been stayed by the force of another body ("nothing," writes Hobbes, "can change it selfe" [*Leviathan* 26; qtd. in Spragens 177]). Where agents are bodies that "work upon or *act*, that is to say, *do* something to another body" and patients are those that "*suffer*, that is, to have something *done* to it by another body" (*Elements of Philosophy* 120), action and passion describe two experiences of the same event. Thus, the threat contained in the lawyer's warning to Bartleby that "[e]ither you must do something, or something must be done to you" reflects the natural law that to do something is *always* to have something done to you (41). But what was done to Bartleby? Who or what changed him from productive scrivener to stationary object? Did he, in fact, ever really change? The rumor passed on by the lawyer that Bartleby had formerly worked in "the Dead Letter Office at Washington" attempts to fill in a backstory of progressive alienation, but its details ("from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in the administration" [45]) highlight the immanence of Bartleby's immobility (even if he is "removed" by larger, structural changes, the fact that motion just happens to him reinforces the idea that he has never moved by desire, that he has never preferred). Thus, the lawyer's theory of how "continually handling these dead letters" exacerbated the abjection of one already "by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness" does not begin to explain the phenomenon of causeless immobility, a "long-continued motionlessness" that seems always to have been the case (45).

The Bartleby problem confuses basic distinctions between living and nonliving beings. Daniel Heller-Roazen, writing about the hierarchical differences among objects, animals, and human beings posited in Augustine's *De libero arbitrio*, recounts the three definitive states of being as existence (*esse*), life (*vivere*), and understanding (*intelligere*):

> First on the ladder of creation is the state of things like the stone and the corpse, which exist but neither live nor understand. Then there is the condition of the animal (*pecus*), which lives and so also exists, even if it cannot be said to understand. And, at the highest level of creation, there are those like Augustine and Evodius, who understand and, by necessity, therefore also exist and live at once. (133)

The scrivener, whom the lawyer calls "a millstone to me" and whose body is continuous with the "cold stones" on which his head lies (32, 44), would appear to occupy the lowest rung of beings: "the stone and the corpse" without sense or intelligence.[11] But Bartleby, a living being who appears merely to exist, also lays strange claim to understanding. Moreover, as corroborated by countless philosophical treatments of the story, he demonstrates an intelligence that eludes and surpasses the understanding of others. The lawyer describes Bartleby's knowingness this way: "It seemed to me that while I had been addressing him, he carefully revolved every statement that

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I made; fully comprehended the meaning; could not gainsay the irresistible conclusions; but, at the same time, some paramount consideration prevailed with him to reply as he did" (5). Instead of conveying madness or stupidity, the insensible gives the impression that it is others who are in the dark, that even after the lawyer closes Bartleby's dead eyes, the scrivener still sees something that we do not.

Allan Moore Emery—in his essay about Bartleby and free will, in which he draws on the two texts alluded to by the lawyer, Jonathan Edwards's *Freedom of the Will* and Joseph Priestley's *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*—identifies the scrivener's "paramount consideration" as "a desire . . . to free his will from *everything* external to it, including all other motivations, and including his reason" (173). In Emery's account, free will describes a state of indeterminacy, or the absence of causation ("motivation" or "reason") in which the subject still has the potential to act in any way. Emery concludes that Bartleby's "paradoxical will" amounts to an untenable and costly idea of freedom, which steers him into a "psychological cul-de-sac" that "exemplif[ies] the ineffectual and distinctly risky nature of all intellectual rebellion" (178). Yet profiling Bartleby as an "intellectual rebel" doomed to psychological blindness imbues him with the kind of subjectivity or personality that is so starkly jettisoned by his character. Emery's attribution to Bartleby of a fundamental "desire" (even if that desire is to free his own will) contradicts the account of Bartleby as sheer capacity untethered to motive. A preference for nonpreference, in other words, cannot count as desire.

The extensive theoretical attention paid to Melville's story by continental philosophers (including Giorgio Agamben, Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Rancière) has focused on this state of absolute potentiality. Agamben, who enlists Bartleby as a "new creature" in the history of philosophy, describes him as "the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives; and at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of this Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality" (271, 253–54). Agamben imagines Bartleby as an impossible "third term" between action and inaction, a state of "suspension" that describes foremost the potential *not* to be, the "potential not to (do or think something)" (250), the divine practice of "decreation" (253), as if the nothing from which God created the earth could have remained nothing. Nancy Ruttenburg, in a persuasive attempt to reconcile readings of Melville's text by continental philosophers and American literary critics, responds to what she sees as a lapse in Agamben's reading by emphasizing how "the philosophically-significant figure of Bartleby makes its appearance in a narrative, the story of an encounter" (143). Ruttenburg's reading of Bartleby as "the limit-case of all character" (147), echoing Deleuze's pronouncement that he performs a "radical, a kind of limit function" (68), reminds us not only how the philosophical abstraction of Bartleby must be understood in a narrative but, more pointedly, how those philosophical abstractions, as I have argued here, precisely concern the origins of narrative itself.

The Unmoved Mover

Smith's account of the insult of unfeeling explained the unsettling effects of blocked sympathy, the way that insensibility incites feeling. Bartleby's impassivity rouses the lawyer's "unheard-of perplexity" and "distress of mind" (35, 25), followed by a cavalcade of fiercer, then softer, then fiercer feelings ("spasmodic passions," "overpowering stinging melancholy," "sincerest pity," "fear," "repulsion," and "nervous resentment" [35, 25, 26, 28, 29, 36]). The lawyer issues this understatement: "I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way" (31). In making emotion equivalent to motion, Melville's text empha-

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sizes how Bartleby's stillness also generates action: a compulsion to move as far away from and as close as possible to the insensible. After failing to move his employee (even into his own home), the lawyer announces, "Since he will not quit me, I must quit him" (39). And, as if relocating a legal practice were not sufficient measure to move away from a "stationary" "fixture," the narrator takes "flight" to the suburbs in his car (41, 32, 42). Once Bartleby is dead, the lawyer heads in the other direction. He recounts of the now affirmatively unmoving body, "[s]omething prompted me to touch him. I felt his hand, when a tingling shiver ran up my arm and down my spine to my feet" (45). Death renders Bartleby touchable at last, but, in fact, the same demonstration is made as when he was alive: immobility inspires motion.[12] Whether living or dead, Bartleby's hand does not move, and it is this very stillness that sends shivers down one's back.

This final scene evokes the Aristotelian concept of the unmoved or prime mover—that is to say, the first cause of the universe that makes all motion possible by not being subject to motion itself. Such an entity introduces divine potentiality as the ultimate instance of immobility: "if there is something which is capable of moving things or acting on them, but is not actually doing so, there will not be movement; for that which has a capacity need not exercise it" (1693; *Metaphysics* 12.6). Sean Gaston, in a reformulation of Derrida's reading of Aristotle, calls such an entity "*the untouchable—that touches everything*."[13] Gaston writes, "[W]e can never stop confessing the desire or temptation or even the hoped-for redemption of touching the untouchable" even as that desire produces a "discourse of impossibility and confession" (132). The lawyer's desire to touch his lifeless clerk expresses less a desire to move Bartleby at last (to prove finally his capacity to be moved) than an acknowledgment of the powers of the unmoved mover, the archetypal insensible. If motion is a chain reaction ("Something prompted me to touch him"), then something must start the chain, and that something must not itself be moving. In fiction, the corollary to this figure is Melville's "Original."

"Original" appears at the end of chapter 43 of *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), after the novel's silver-tongued "man charmer" swindles a barber out of the price of his shave through his signature confabulation about philanthropy and trust. The barber, left "in a maze, staring after" his "queer customer," later relates the story to friends, who pronounce the swindler "QUITE AN ORIGINAL" (237). Melville devotes the next and penultimate chapter to an elaboration of that phrase and, in particular, to an inquiry about "original characters in fiction"—a rare species not to be confused with merely "odd characters," who are "novel, or singular, or striking" (238). The essential difference rests not in some identifiable quality immanent to originals but in the nature of the response evoked by such figures—in their beholders' sudden concern with causation or, in other words, a pressing need to know the origins of the original. Whereas an odd character provokes a response along the lines of, "I have never seen anyone like you before!" an original always elicits the question, "*Where* did you come from?" (or, as the lawyer puts it, what are its "original sources"? ["Bartleby" 13]). Melville rules out the likeliest answer by averring that originals "cannot be born in the author's imagination" (*Confidence-Man* 239). Novelists do not create characters but simply "pick them up" (238), and to the following questions of where and how, Melville flatly answers "in town" and with "much luck" (238, 239).

Such perspicuous glibness reinforces the status of originality as an effect rather than a thing. Whereas an odd character, in the following much-discussed passage, possesses "something personal—confined to itself," an original "is like a revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all round it—everything is lit by it, everything starts up to it . . .

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so that, in certain minds, there follows upon the adequate conception of such a character, an effect, in its way akin to that which in Genesis attends upon the beginning of things" (239). As with the spirit of God that moves on the face of the waters before letting there be light, illumination is conceived as motion—here, as Melville scholars have discerned, as one of the limelights atop P. T. Barnum's American Museum whose searching incandescence had the effect of bringing a still city to life: "everything is lit by it, everything starts up to it." In the impresario's own words, such devices "in the darkest night, threw a flood of light up and down Broadway, from the Battery to Niblo's, that would enable one to read a newspaper in the street" (61). "[T]he sense of originality" lies in those that are moved rather than in the mover (Melville, *Confidence-Man* 238). The inert piece of quicklime that gets ignited by an oxyhydrogen flame (or the glow of incandescence that gets swiveled by a mechanical contraption or even the spirit of God in Genesis) has no meaning in itself. And like the novelist who only "picks up" characters in the "man-show" of the city, even Barnum, the driver of capitalist spectacle, cannot be said to originate his own limelight (238).[14] The power of originality is not manifest in an agent but in the world of motions it makes possible. As Ruttenburg, engaging Branka Arsić's study of "Bartleby," observes, "[T]he representative challenge inheres not in the Drummond light itself, but with those who live in and struggle to account for its peculiar illumination" (152). Like the newsprint suddenly set aglow by Barnum's device, that world is narrative itself.

I want to conclude by suggesting that such high stakes for understanding the insensible call for a reconsideration of the relation of narrative and a particularly visible figure of unfeeling today, the autistic subject. Studies of fictionality, for example, have tended to premise the phenomenon of reading on emotional or psychological responsiveness, the very trait that goes missing in the insensible. Lisa Zunshine articulates this claim most clearly in positing the task or essence of fiction as "mind-reading," or as engaging "our ability to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires" (6). A theory that equates reading fiction with inferring mental states, Zunshine writes, explains why autistic persons display "a lack of interest in fiction and storytelling" since they are challenged precisely in the activity of intuiting others' feelings and desires (8). But what if, as my essay has suggested, narrative relies on "autistic personhood" or "lifeworlds" (Orsini and Davidson 10), on a vision of affective nonresponsiveness and illegibility in the form of a recalcitrant subject who defies fundamental concepts of human agency, interiority, and ontology? Amit Pinchevski, in an important study demonstrating the embeddedness of Melville's fictional character to early clinical theories of autism, has described how "incommunicablity breeds communication" (39). Relating the solipsistic, nonsignifying, and gendered "figures of Bartleby, the Muselmann, and the autistic," Pinchevski argues, "It is their failure to speak that summons the production of speech by others who set out to tackle that failure. It is their incommunicativeness that obliges others to speak for them, on their behalf, or in their stead" (38). Such claims illuminate the narrative stakes for a theory of the insensible (Pinchevski's incommunicable, Melville's original) as the unmoving center or "millstone" (to return to Melville and Hobbes) in a field of causes and effects, agents and patients. The dependence of narrative on such a figure makes certain elements surprisingly immanent to storytelling: a resistance to depth, the primacy of nonrecognition, and an absence of desire. Narrative's journey toward the innermost part of the sentient comes to rest with the enduring mystery of the living immobile, or in the strange persistence of the Bartleby problem.

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Notes

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1. See also Coli's summary: "All is motion in Hobbes's philosophy, and at the root of his anthropology lies movement, from which arises all our passions, the aim of which is our personal pleasure, every individual being dominated by his own self-interest" (81).

2. My essay is indebted to James's illuminating exposition of Hobbes's theories of emotions and to her discussion of the discourse of passion and action more generally in early philosophy.

3. Moral sense theorists like Shaftesbury and Hutcheson argued strenuously for the existence of innate benevolence in reaction to Hobbes's natural state of war. Hobbes's perceived amorality was also reinforced during the period by an association with Mandeville's inflammatory demonstration of how egoism drives prosperity in his *Fable of the Bees* (1705). But where Mandeville was taken to be cynically advocating, as he put it, "private vices" to ensure "publick benefits," Hobbes was construed more charitably as an intellectual casualty of his times, a man whose ideas about humankind were conditioned by the civic disorder that followed regicide. According to Shaftesbury, "the good sociable man, as savage and unsociable as he would make himself and all mankind appear by his philosophy, exposed himself during his life, and took the utmost pains that after his death we might be delivered from the occasion of these terrors" (42). Isabel Rivers observes of the ambivalence toward Hobbes maintained by eighteenth-century philosophical culture: "It seems fair to say that the freethinkers drew on aspects of Hobbes's treatment of religion and natural philosophy while discounting the uncongenial aspects of his moral and political thought" (21).

4. Descartes, like Hobbes, averred that the difference between action and passion is a matter of standpoint. Descartes begins his *Passions of the Soul* by observing "that whatever takes place or occurs is generally called by philosophers a 'passion' with regard to the subject to which it happens and an 'action' with regard to that which makes it happen. Thus, although an agent and patient are often quite different, an action and passion must always be a single thing which has these two names on account of the two different subjects to which it may be related" (218). On Melville's engagement with Descartes, see Arsić's chapter "Bartleby or the Cloud" (155–66).

5. Leys's intentionalist account of emotions calls explicitly for a narrative model: "the moment one abandons the Tomkins-Ekman [nonintentionalist] paradigm in favor of some kind of intentionalist interpretation of the affects, one finds oneself forced to provide thick descriptions of life experiences of the kind that are familiar to anthropologists and novelists but are widely held to be inimical to science" ("Turn" 471).

6. See Kramnick's *Actions and Objects*, which emphasizes the externalism of Hobbes's theory of causation. Kramnick argues that Hobbes's grounding of human action in interior states like appetite and fear has obscured the diffusiveness of his theory, in which those very mental states originate in numberless external events and objects. According to Kramnick, "The locking of the will onto attitudes like wanting or fearing, knowing or believing, had seemed to commit Hobbes to a kind of inward account of actions, one that specified their causal history in terms of a mental vocabulary of desires or intentions. But on further inspection it turns out that Hobbes is equally committed to describing the history of actions with respect to their peripheral beginnings, in contexts beyond the person" (33). Where Kramnick takes up those contexts beyond personhood that result in, complicate, and constitute human agency, I am precisely revisiting the complexity and inconsistency of Hobbes's "inward account of actions."

7. Distinctions between feelings, emotions, affects, and so on—untenable as they are—have become part of the debate about affect studies. As Ellison writes, "One of the reasons why it is difficult to stabilize the meanings of terms like 'sensibility,' 'sympathy,' and 'sentiment' is that they not only vary according to their usage in distinct historical contexts but they also change as scholars seek an integrated understanding of emotions" (5). Even within a particular historical context, terminology is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down. See Dixon's observation that "affective discourses and terminologies in the eighteenth century were too complex for it to be possible to discern in them any *single* attitude to human passions (or to 'emotions' or 'feeling' or 'sentiment')" (66). For those who work on the history and philosophy of emotions, such slipperiness of terms is both an unavoidable frustration and a rich subject of study in itself. See Rorty on the changing discourses.

8. See Ngai's broader argument that modernity calls for a new repertoire of emotions: "in the transnational stage of capitalism that defines our contemporary moment, our emotions no longer link up as securely as they once did with the models of social action and transformation theorized by Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, and others under the signs of relatively unambiguous emotions like anger or fear" (5). As tantalizing as such a call for a modernist theory of emotions may be, the lump characterization of early philosophy may be an unnecessary reduction. The elaborate taxonomies of feeling that so occupy Western philosophers after Aristotle precisely grapple with the instability of phenomena like anger and fear and their relation to each other and to other emotions. Ngai's fascinating project to "pursue the Bartlebyan question of suspended agency beyond its nineteenth-century context through the twentieth century and into the present" opens up an important conversation about

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inaction and the politics of late modernity, but it also leaves considerable room to move in the other direction, into the antecedents of the Bartleby problem.

9. For an analysis of how immobility functions in the context of capitalism, see Reed's complex critique of how Bartleby's stillness exposes the abstract interchangeability of circulating commodities.

10. In the same paragraph in which he accuses Bartleby of an aggravating "passive resistance," the lawyer rationalizes that "his eccentricities are involuntary" (23). See also the "little, dried-up man" in chapter 10 of *The Confidence-Man* "who looked as if he never dined" and is "naturally numb in his sensibilities."

11. The image of the millstone is another link to Hobbesian insensibility. It features in Job 41, in the description of the Leviathan: "His heart is as firm as a stone; yea, as hard as a piece of the nether millstone." The lower millstone is the fixed and hard stone on which the upper stone revolves on a shaft. See also Deleuze on Melville's characters who are "almost stupid, creatures of innocence and purity, stricken with a constitutive weakness but also with a strange beauty. Petrified by nature, they prefer . . . no will at all, a nothingness of the will rather than a will to nothingness (hypochondriacal 'negativism'). They can only survive by becoming stone, by denying the will and sanctifying themselves in this suspension" (80).

12. The lawyer recounts earlier repulses; for example, he asks Bartleby "to put his finger" on the knot tied around some of his papers, presumably in hopes of bringing their fingers to touch through the "bit of red tape" (26).

13. According to Gaston, philosophy's search for the untouchable as a concept that unifies individual moral judgment and the organization of a moral society "can be traced at least back to Hobbes" and specifically to *Leviathan* as "at once a very serious response to the philosophical, political, and religious events of the 1640s and a utopian tract" that idealizes the social benefits of sovereignty (141).

14. Barnum appeared in Melville's satirical pieces "Authentic Anecdotes of 'Old Zack,'" which ran anonymously in the humorous periodical *Yankee Doodle* at the height of public interest in Zachary Taylor, following the general's military exploits in the Mexican-American War. These sketches depict Barnum in aggressive pursuit of all artifacts (genuine or otherwise) that testify to Taylor's reputed unfeeling: his "insensibility to bodily pain" and "utter indifference to danger" (217), "inflexible and immoveable ironness of purpose" (219) and the fact that he "never betrayed the slightest consciousness of the presence of what an ordinary man would have deemed no small annoyance" (217), such as a tack in the saddle that rips through the seat of his pants (a garment solicited by Barnum for display in his museum). Barnum's Drummond light features in the short piece "A New Planet," another anonymous *Yankee Doodle* contribution credited to Melville by the Newberry editors, but, instead of a planet, the limelight is cast as a "natal star" that "has presided over the birth of a great many wonderful and curious creatures" (446).

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