*Journal of American Studies*, **53** (2019), 2, 353–371
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doi:10.1017/S0021875817001402 First published online 2 November 2017

# Bartleby's Closed Desk: Reading Melville against Affect

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To reconsider the affective turn in American literary studies, this essay reads Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), with reference to "Benito Cereno" (1855) and *The Confidence-Man* (1857), as an anti-affect story. By shedding light on silent characters in these works – Bartleby, Babo, and Black Guinea – it argues that Melville endeavors to adumbrate, not articulate, their private interiorities through language. Calling the inner recesses of his silent characters "secret emotions," Melville probes into the boundaries between the effable and the ineffable by testing the limits of literary language. If "affect" refers to the kind of emotion that eludes signification through language, reading Melville in this manner encourages a reappraisal of the relationship between affect as a non-linguistic emotion and literature as a linguistic construct.

## INTRODUCTION

We are all curious about what is inside Bartleby's closed desk. In Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), the narrator, baffled by the eponymous character's stubborn refusal to tell his private history, secretly opens the scrivener's desk to get a glimpse of this mysterious character's inner life.[1] Refusing to tell anything about himself, Bartleby's enigmatic existence entices the narrator to look inside the closed desk. To his disappointment, the narrator finds in Bartleby's desk nothing but a tiny sum of money, failing to gain any information about the scrivener's secret life. If Bartleby's desk is a metaphor for his mind, then, figuratively speaking, the desk remains closed to the narrator as much as to the reader. Nonetheless, we still do want to inquire into his inner recesses. The idea of Bartleby's interiority is troubling because he seldom discloses his inner life, while his mysterious silence nonetheless invites the reader to look into his mind. Readers of literature in general are curious to learn more about the inner lives of fictional characters. Melville's story, in particular, compels us to ask, "how does Bartleby feel?" The narrator's act of opening Bartleby's desk without his permission raises an ethical problem

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[1] Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" in Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces: 1839–1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford et al. (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1987), 13–45, 28.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001402 Published online by Cambridge University Press

concerning the violence of invading the other's interiority. This essay seeks to address the potential violence arising from readerly inquisitiveness about fictional characters' psychological workings inside their minds.

I approach this problem of violence by reconsidering the "affective turn" in literary studies, which offers us a critical vocabulary to talk about psychological interiority. The past decade has seen an outpouring of studies that utilize affect theory to examine different modes of feeling in American literature. From Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005) to Paul Hurh's *American Terror* (2015) and Adam Frank's *Transferential Poetics* (2015), scholars have addressed the distinctive ways in which a certain set of feelings manifests themselves in American literary works.[2] These studies have contributed to reinstating emotions and feelings, which had previously been overlooked as inferior to rationality, as viable topics for critical analysis. The relationship between affect theory and literature has proven to be symbiotic, opening innovative ways of looking at emotions in literary works. In this essay, however, I would like to step back from this ongoing critical trend to reconsider the applicability of affect theory to literature.

My dual interests in the potential violence of knowing a silent character's interiority and in the larger stakes of affect theory run concomitant with each other. The kind of violence this essay seeks to foreground is that of language as a vehicle of emotional expression, which forcefully gives names to the unknown interiority of silent characters. This is where affect theory becomes relevant because of its concern with the role that language plays in articulating human emotions. Despite a plethora of studies that seek to define what "affect" is, one of the central concerns of affect theory revolves around language: to what extent can we articulate our feelings through linguistic means? According to affect theorists such as Brian Massumi and others, affect, in contradistinction to "feeling" or "emotion," resists signification and articulation through language.[3] As Ann Pellegrini and Jasbir Puar note,

[2] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Paul Hurh, *American Terror: The Feeling of Thinking in Edwards, Poe, and Melville* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); Adam Frank, *Transferential Poetics, from Poe to Warhol* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015). For other notable monographs on affect and American literature see Jane F. Thrailkill, *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Jeffery Santa Ana, *Racial Feelings: Asian America in a Capitalist Culture of Emotion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015).

[3] Throughout this essay, I alternate between "emotion" and "feeling," while explicitly distinguishing them from "affect." Sara Ahmed argues, "For Massumi, if affects are pre-personal and non-intentional, emotions are personal and intentional; if affects are unmediated and escape signification; emotions are mediated and contained by signification." Sara Ahmed,

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affect serves to anchor claims about "the materiality of bodies and physiological processes that are not contained or representable by language."[4] Eric Shouse views affect as "a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential." "Affect," Shouse continues, "is the most abstract because affect cannot be fully realized in language, and because affect is always prior to and/or outside of consciousness."[5] The question, then, should arise regarding the viability of employing affect theory to read literature, allegedly a vehicle of expression through language par excellence, in comparison to other artistic media such as movies which employ a combination of words, images, and sound all at once.[6] Of course, authors also work to convey sensory information in their works, but their mode of expression is bound to language. Then, can "affect," the kind of emotion that eludes containment in language, be found in literary works whose components are specifically related to it? In other words, can the non-linguistic emotion be located in the linguistic construct? This question, it seems, has gone unnoted by critics working in the intersection between literature and affect theory.

Melville offers good examples that help us rethink the convoluted relationship between affect and literature. This essay reads "Bartleby," with reference to "Benito Cereno" (1855) and *The Confidence-Man* (1857), as an anti-affect story, arguing that Melville endeavors to *adumbrate*, not *articulate*, character's interiority through language. He does so by portraying the figure of silence that mark characters whose interiority is hidden from the reader. The portrayals of Bartleby, Babo in "Benito Cereno," and Black Guinea in *The Confidence-Man* coalesce to present to the reader with what Melville calls "secret emotions"

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*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 207. For further discussions on the distinctions between these terms see Ann Cvetkovich, "Affect," in Bruce Burgett and Glen Hendler, eds., *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 13–16; Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 28–32; Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 2; Ngai, 25–26.

[4] Ann Pellegrini and Jasbir Puar, "Affect," *Social Text*, 100, 27 (2009), 35–38, 37. Clare Hemmings argues that the affect theory's move away from language originates in critics' antipathy to post-structualism: "What all critiques share is a lamenting of the turn to language represented by poststructualism … Sedgwick and Massumi's interest in affect must therefore be seen within the context of broader challenge to poststructuralist approaches to language, power and subjectivity." Clare Hemmings, "Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn," *Cultural Studies*, 19, 5 (2005), 548–67, 554–55.

[5] Eric Shouse, "Feeling, Emotion, Affect," *M/C Journal*, 8, 6 (2005), at http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php.

[6] For a film study utilizing affect theory see Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001402 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hidden behind their impenetrable silences.[7] Melville's gesture toward their secret emotions represents a means of imagining their interiorities without doing violence to the sanctity of their inner spaces. This essay seeks to situate the author as struggling somewhere between ineffable affect and articulated emotions. Amidst the affective turn in literary studies, I read Melville against affect to probe into the ways in which the author works to evade "textual violence," so to speak, to his own characters' interiority by testing the limits of literary language.[8]

## THE ECONOMY OF EMOTIONS

"Bartleby" is a text that abounds with feelings. While the titular character seldom exhibits his emotions, instead merely repeating "I would prefer not to" when asked a question, other characters, especially the narrator, constantly show signs of discomfort throughout the story. The narrator's words present him as perpetually irritated, uncomfortable, and displeased, negative feelings that are principally aroused by his strange employees: Turkey, Nippers, and Bartleby. Sianne Ngai's work on what she terms "ugly feelings" offers a helpful point of departure in understanding how feelings work in this tale. According to Ngai, in contrast to grand passions like anger and fear, ugly feelings are "*non*cathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release."[9] Indeed, "Bartleby" is rife with the sort of ugly feelings that Ngai investigates in her book. Undramatic feelings such as irritation, uneasiness, squeamishness, and displeasure dominate both the characters' psyches and the text at large. Drawing on her work, what I would like to problematize in "Bartleby" is a tense relationship between amorphous, ineffable feelings and taxonomic language, with the latter ceaselessly trying to dominate and articulate the former.[10] Melville's story foregrounds, I argue, the narrator's insatiable desire to name the ugly feelings that he goes through in attempting to deal with Bartleby. In examining the place of language in the story, I demonstrate how the narrator's economic interest runs

[7] Ngai discusses in detail Melville's works. Her study takes up mainly *The Confidence-Man*, though with frequent nods to "Bartleby."

[8] For a critical appraisal of affect studies in the humanities see Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry*, 37 (Spring 2011), 434–72.

[9] Ngai, 6; italics original.

[10] While much indebted to Ngai's work, my argument ultimately departs from hers by situating taxonomic language at odds with Melville's poetics. Ngai divides *Ugly Feelings* into seven chapters, each of which has a discrete feeling as its title: "Tone," "Animatedness," "Envy," "Irritation," "Anxiety," "Stuplimity," and "Paranoia." In neatly categorizing ugly feelings, Ngai's argument can be seen as taxonomic in its overall engagement with a various set of feelings.

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concomitant with his act of articulating feelings. In focussing on the narrator's capitalistic investments, my inquiry intervenes in a long tradition of Marxist criticism of "Bartleby," which began with Louise K. Barnett's seminal essay in the 1970s and still continues to this day. Marxist readings have put the story in conversation with capitalism in a variety of ways – for instance, by viewing Bartleby as an alienated worker in the marketplace and by placing the story in the historical context of mid-nineteenth-century labor and class struggles.[11] What has gone unexamined in this long critical history, however, is the close relationship between capitalism and emotions in the story, the kind of affective dynamics which I term the "economy of emotions."

To understand the story's engagement with emotions, the noncathartic nature of Ngai's ugly feelings requires particular attention. For Ngai, "noncathartic" refers to the denial of catharsis or a purifying sense of release, with negative feelings remaining inside the subject who feels them, as opposed to being externalized. Trapped inside, where do these feelings end up? One possible route is "irritation," one of the ugly feelings that preoccupies the narrator of "Bartleby." In the story, he constantly finds himself irritated by his employees, Turkey and Nippers, who have difficulty working throughout a day due to their shifting tempers. For example, the narrator bemoans Turkey's failure to work in the afternoon: "Now, valuing his morning services as I did, and resolved not to lose them; yet, at the same time made uncomfortable by his inflamed ways after twelve o'clock."[12] This passage indexes not only the narrator's passivity in dealing with the irritation caused by his employee, but also his active involvement in the affective circulation and exchange of ugly feelings for economic value. When he says, "valuing his morning services as I did, and resolved not to lose them," he seems to accept and suffer, albeit begrudgingly, the ugly feeling *in exchange for* the valuable labor that Turkey provides: valuable, not so much because his work is itself valuable, as because it costs the narrator little. Indeed, he describes Turkey as "a man with so small an income."[13]

[11] For noteworthy Marxist readings of the story see Louise K. Barnett, "Bartleby as Alienated Worker," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 11, 4 (1974), 379–85; Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 132–45; Gillian Brown, "The Empire of Agoraphobia," *Representations*, 20, 4 (1987), 134–57; David Kuebrich, "Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in 'Bartleby,'" *New England Quarterly*, 69, 3 (1996), 381–405; Barbara Foely, "From Wall Street to Astor Place: Historicizing Melville's 'Bartleby,'" *American Literature*, 72, 1 (2000), 87–116; Naomi C. Reed, "The Specter of Wall Street: 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' and the Language of Commodities," *American Literature*, 76, 2 (2004), 247–73; Nancy D. Goldfarb, "Charity as Purchase: Buying Self-Approval in Melville's 'Bartleby, the Scrivener'," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 69, 2 (2014), 233–61. Reed, 248–49, offers a concise, valuable history of Marxist criticism of "Bartleby."

[12] Melville, "Bartleby," 16.

[13] Ibid., 17.

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The same affective dynamics of exchange are at work in the case of Nippers: "With all his failings, and the annoyances he caused me, Nippers, like his compatriot Turkey, was a very useful man to me."[14] Implicit in this passage is the narrator's assumption that, in return for the ugly feelings that he receives from Nippers, he expects economic usefulness and value from him. With regard to Turkey and Nippers, the narrator equally suggests that the ugly feelings are sufferable on the condition that they are exchanged by the cheap but valuable labor his employees provide. Feelings exist in Melville's tale in a kind of economic circulation and exchange. As a calculating businessman, he weighs the value of his employees' services against the discomfort caused by them. As long as the former outweighs the latter, the logic goes, he agrees to keep employing them. The narrator does not let himself become an object made to feel the ugly feelings, but vigorously transmutes them into economic value.

To clarify the dynamics through which feelings are thus exchanged for economic value in "Bartleby," I would like to propose the idea of an economy of emotions in the story. The meaning of "economy" here is threefold. First of all, it refers to a process whereby a certain emotion is exchanged for a certain economic value. Second, the narrator is being "economical" by maximizing the affective value of his ugly feelings. That is, he pays his employees tiny salaries to minimize the affective cost for the ugly feelings they give him. Finally, the word can mean "[t]he careful management of resources" (*OED*), and the narrator is, as we will see later in this essay, adept at managing and controlling his feelings as if they were some material objects. These three senses inform the economy of emotions that drive Melville's story.

## "A—": THE INSTITUTION OF LANGUAGE

The economy of emotions gestures to the crucial nature of language in "Bartleby." To facilitate the economy of emotions in his office, the narrator actively deploys his linguistic ability to manage his feelings. Just as he is able to tame his excitable employees, the narrator seeks to control his own feelings, especially by giving names to his shifting affective states. While put in the passive position of being made uncomfortable by his employees, he adeptly controls his feelings through the act of naming. He uses a nearly endless number of words to express his emotions: "uncomfortable," "consternation," "disconcerted," "uneasiness," "melancholy," "unpleasant," "pained," "despondency," "exasperated," "worried," "squeamishness," "fearful," and "indignant."[15] The exhaustive number of words the narrator uses showcases not only the great range of ugly feelings that he experiences, but also the rich vocabulary

[14] Ibid., 17.

[15] Ibid., 16, 20, 21, 27, 28, 35, 35, 36, 36, 38, 40, 42, 42.

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with which to articulate and classify them. He is superbly voluble about what he feels, and the act of naming his feelings helps him to maintain his status as a naming subject as opposed to the victim of ugly feelings.

The narrator is skillful not only at naming feelings but also at masking them through language. For instance, at the beginning of the story, the narrator boasts of his rational temperament, noting, "I seldom lose my temper; much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages."[16] Shortly after this, however, he goes on to observe, "I must be permitted to be rash here and declare, that I consider the sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Master in Chancery, by the new Constitution, as a — premature act."[17] His words here explicitly conflict with his self-recognition as a man who seldom loses his temper. The words "a — premature act" suggest that he is trying to check his anger at having been robbed of a lucrative job, "the office of Master in Chancery," in order to present his rational, socially respectable profile to the world. The dash put before "premature" registers a brief moment in search of a more appropriate word than, say, "ridiculous" or "ludicrous," words that would more clearly convey a sense of anger. However, such words would tarnish his social respectability as a rational man not easily swayed by feelings.[18] After the short moment of struggle, he settles on "premature" to express his discomfort. His feelings, as expressed in the narrative, work in tandem with his rational calculation.

Despite the narrator's adept control of his feelings through language, however, at a certain moment in the story a radical transformation appears to occur in his affective subjectivity: a shift from feeling subject to feeling object. The advent of Bartleby in the narrator's office initiates this transformation. Once Bartleby starts working in his office, the narrator begins to find difficulty naming what he feels with regard to this mysterious employee:

> With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously from my presence. *But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but, in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me*.[19]

> Now, the utterly unsurmised appearance of Bartleby … had such *a strange effect* upon me, that incontinently I slunk away from my own door, and did as desired. But not without sundry twinges of impotent rebellion against the mild effrontery of this

[16] Ibid., 14.
[17] Ibid., 14.
[18] See Daniel Diez Couch, "'A Syntax of Silence': The Punctuated Spaces in 'Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street'," *Studies in American Fiction*, 42, 2 (2015), 167–90, on the punctuations and dashes in the narrator's mode of writing.
[19] Melville, "Bartleby," 21; italics added.

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unaccountable scrivener. Indeed, it was his *wonderful* mildness chiefly, which not only disarmed me, but unmanned, me as it were.[20]

Remarkable in these passages is the repetition of words such as "strange" and "wonderful," which speak to the narrator's sense of disorientation at his failure to articulate his feelings. He definitely feels something, but finds himself somehow unable to name it. What is more, the repetition of "me" as an object of the verb in "disarmed me, but unmanned me" and "touched and disconcerted me" registers his transformation from feeling subject to object. Most illustratively, the narrator is dumbstruck when he first hears the famous words from Bartleby, "I would prefer not to": "I sat awhile in perfect silence."[21] The narrator's inability to verbalize his own feelings implies that Bartleby's entrance into his life begins to carry him beyond the bounds of language.[22] The narrator's feelings that lie outside language can be tentatively termed "affect," in the sense in which Brian Massumi and the strain of his criticism employ the term.[23] Margaret Wetherell offers a concise definition: "Affect seems to index a realm beyond talk, words, and texts, beyond epistemic regimes, and beyond conscious representation and cognition." Unlike emotion or feeling, Wetherell maintains, affect is "something that has not yet been closed down, represented, labelled, communicated, shaped, and structured."[24] Affect, in short, refers to unformed feelings that escape cognitive recognition and clear delineation by language, in contradistinction to its adjacent concepts, feelings, and emotions that are subject to representation through words.[25]

One of affect theory's principle achievements has been to have liberated feelings from various sociocultural confines. Clare Hemming acutely notes that affect theorists "emphasize the unexpected, the singular, or indeed the quirky, over the generally applicable, where the latter becomes associated

[20] Ibid., 26–27; italics added.

[21] Ibid., 20.

[22] The narrator's inability to express his feelings toward the scrivener denies him a sense of catharsis. Due to Bartleby's "passive resistance," the narrator cannot feel anger toward the scrivener strong enough to express in words, suffering only a minor sense of uneasiness. Looking for ways of emotional catharsis, he feels "burned to be rebelled against" more by Bartleby. Melville, "Bartleby," 23, 14.

[23] "Affect" as a critical term is so complicated that it is virtually impossible to pin down a single definition. As Jonathan Flatley notes, "while there is a great deal of excellent recent work on affect in several disciplines … this does not mean that a general consensus, or even a common conversation, has emerged." Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 11.

[24] Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding* (London: Sage, 2013), 19, 59.

[25] Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction*, 3, defines "affect" as what "designates body-based feelings that arise in response to elicitors as varied as interpersonal and institutional relations."

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with the pessimism of social determinist perspectives, and the former with the hope of freedom from social constraint."[26] If the narrator is trapped within social structures, as is evident in his effort to show his rational profile to the world and to make economic profits, it is Bartleby, the social outcast in every respect, who takes him beyond language into the realm of affect. Bartleby, "a smooth being outside of language," as Branka Arsić puts it, appears before the narrator as a liberator who shows him an alternative mode of life that lies outside social institutions.[27] If we are to name one particular institution that traps the narrator, it is the institution of language. As Henri-Jacques Stiker notes, language constitutes a social institution:

> To name, designate, point out, is to make exist … The institution of language is the primary social institution in which all the others are inscribed and, indeed, where they originate … Language is an institution, in the double sense that it is socially established and that it arranges the social fact.[28]

Indeed, the advent of Bartleby in the narrator's office appears to collapse a world constituted by this institution of language.

## "MISERABLE LONELINESS": THE TAXONOMY OF EMOTIONS

The power of affect thus appears to triumph over the narrator's ability to name and control feelings. Upon closer inspection, the story turns out to be much more of an anti-affect tale. Much as he is enticed toward the realm of affect, however, the narrator nonetheless strives to stay within the social realm, consciously or unconsciously resisting his drifting outside it. Despite his difficulty in naming his feelings, the narrator endeavors to tame them by forcefully allotting some form of names. He undertakes the creation of a taxonomy of emotions, whereby unnamed feelings are put into neatly classifiable categories. This propensity for taxonomy sounds quite unlike the Melville who, in *Moby-Dick* (1851), demonstrates the impossibility of taxonomizing the whale's interior in the "Cetology" chapter. For Melville, as Christopher Castiglia notes, "ridicules the 'systemized exhibition' of interior traits that will produce a clear taxonomy of whales."[29]

[26] Hemmings, "Invoking Affect," 550.

[27] Branka Arsić, *Passive Constitutions, or, 7 1/2 Times Bartleby* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 141.

[28] Henri-Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability*, trans. William Sayers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 153.

[29] Christopher Castiglia, *Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States* (Durham. NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 14. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael notes the impossibility of classifying the whale's interior: "It is some systematized exhibition of the whale in his broad genera, that I would now fain put before you. Yet it is no easy task. The classification of the constituents of a chaos,

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Faced with Bartleby's refusal to work, the narrator finds himself incapable of exchanging the ugly feelings for the economic value just as in the cases of Nippers and Turkey. Bartleby thus defies and disrupts the economy of emotions that governs the narrator's office. As Naomi C. Reed puts it, "The story is a complex meditation on the structure and workings of capitalism and of circulation under capitalism … Bartleby, in short, refuses every form of circulation in which he is pushed to participate."[30] Yet the narrator concocts another way of turning his ugly feelings to profit: he transforms the irritation he feels toward Bartleby into a sense of self-satisfaction at being charitable to the poor scrivener. "I strove to drown my exasperated feelings towards the scrivener," he states, "by benevolently construing his conduct. Poor fellow, poor fellow!"[31] Within this very sentence, his "exasperated feelings" morph into his "sweet" recognition of his own benevolence, which evidently affords him a sense of moral satisfaction that adds to his social respectability. The narrator's desire for moral satisfaction is more pronounced in his expression of friendship: "To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange willfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience."[32] Noteworthy here is the use of the word "cost" to refer to his act of "befriending," which is no more than an economically calculated act that speaks to the intertwinement of economy and morality. In the economic calculation that dictates the narrator's thoughts, to befriend or to give benevolence to Bartleby "costs" him little to get a "sweet morsel for his conscience." The narrator finally proves capable of controlling and managing his feelings through economic calculation. Within the terms of our discussion on the economy of emotions, ugly feelings toward Bartleby are exchanged for charitable feelings, which affords the narrator another form of "value."

David Kuebrich aptly calls the narrator's sympathy for Bartleby "capitalist compassion," the kind of compassion that is "'reasonable' in a culture organized in terms of self-interest." The narrator's charity, Kuebrich argues, "must be useful to him, serving to stroke his vanity, promote his personal security, increase efficiency in his office, save him from professional embarrassment, or help him to be rid of his unwanted clerk."[33] Kuebrich's argument is noteworthy in its fusion of feeling and reason. Behind a seemingly altruistic feeling lies the narrator's self-centered ego, which rationally seeks to capitalize on the ugly feeling to gain moral complacency. At the beginning of the story,

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nothing less is here essayed … But I now leave my cetological System standing thus unfinished." Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Harrison Hayford et al. (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1988), 134, 145.

[30] Reed, "The Specter of Wall Street," 249.

[31] Melville, "Bartleby," 36.

[32] Ibid., 23–24.

[33] Kuebrich, "Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions," 396.

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the narrator boasts of his relationship with John Jacob Astor, a billionaire of nineteenth-century America.[34] As Nancy D. Goldfarb notes, Astor was widely known as a benefactor who offered significant contributions to public institutions.[35] Goldfarb discusses the narrator's intermingling of capitalistic rationality and compassionate feeling: "Through the lawyer–narrator, Melville implicates philanthropy as a tool of capitalism, a means of diverting attention from the selfishness and greed underlying the American market system."[36] According to Goldfarb, by molding himself not only as a successful businessman but also as a socially respectable, charitable person, the narrator aspires to be a man like Astor.[37] Rather than being antagonistic to each other, the narrator's emotion and rationality are collusive, with the latter trying to control the former via language. This story, then, traces the trajectory of a man enticed into the realm of ineffable affect to one who triumphs over affect through the power of rational language.

The narrator seeks to manage and control not only his own feelings but Bartleby's as well. In reference to the solitary nature of Bartleby, the narrator wails, "What miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible!"[38] In the guise of sympathy, the narrator is here according a negative, ugly feeling of loneliness to Bartleby's solitary state by conflating solitude and loneliness. The narrator's understanding of Bartleby is quite simple: being alone in the world without a family and friends is a horrible thing, and therefore Bartleby should be pitied. However, there is no way to ascertain whether he indeed feels lonely, even if he definitely appears solitary. As the narrator himself notes, "I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach."[39] Cognizant of the inaccessibility of Bartleby's interiority, the narrator nonetheless makes an assumption as to Bartleby's sense of suffering.

"Solitude" and "loneliness" are easy to conflate. Helpful in drawing a distinction between the two concepts is Philip Koch's philosophical work on solitude. In his study, he defines "solitude" as a neutral mental state that does not share in the negative connotation of "loneliness": "Now if you begin by misdefining solitude as loneliness, the inherent negativity of loneliness is going to lead you to stigmatize solitude; but then it will be unclear as to whether you have attained some bold new insight into the subject – or simply changed

[34] Melville, "Bartleby," 14. [35] Goldfarb, "Charity as Purchase," 240. [36] Ibid., 258.
[37] For the conception of philanthropy in Melville's day see Susan M. Ryan, "Misgivings: Melville, Race, and the Ambiguities of Benevolence," *American Literary History*, 12, 4 (2000), 685–712. [38] Melville, "Bartleby," 27. [39] Ibid., 29.

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it."[40] "Loneliness," he claims, "is the unpleasant feeling of longing for some kind of human interaction."[41] The reader has little idea of what Bartleby is feeling in the story. Despite such unknowability, the narrator rushes to label and devalorize the solitary state of Bartleby, turning him into an object of his capitalist compassion. By pretending to know the unknowable, the narrator is said to be perpetrating violence to Bartleby's interiority to get a "sweet morsel for [his] conscience." Manipulating Bartleby's interiority by turning him into a pitiable, lonely creature, the narrator capitalizes on it to gain moral satisfaction. Just as Bartleby ends up being institutionalized in the Tomb as a beggar, the narrator seeks to contain the scrivener's inscrutable existence through the institutional power of language.

Generally speaking, the act of naming is synonymous with a desire for possession. Naming something or someone is another word for "the exertion of dominion over that thing or person."[42] In naming Bartleby's interiority, the narrator exhibits his violent desire to know and possess the other's interior space. Rodolphe Gasché regards the classificatory nature of naming as "a violent act of entering the interior and proper space of another," the very act which the narrator commits to the scrivener.[43] A symptomatic scene occurs when, toward the middle of the story, the narrator opens Bartleby's desk in his desire to know more about what he thinks and feels:

> Suddenly I was attracted by Bartleby's closed desk, the key in open sight left in the lock. I mean no mischief, seek the gratification of no heartless curiosity, thought I; besides, the desk is mine, and its contents, too, so I will make bold to look within. Everything was methodically arranged, the papers smoothly placed. The pigeon holes were deep, and removing the files of documents, I groped into their recesses. Presently I felt something there, and dragged it out. It was an old bandana handkerchief, heavy and knotted. I opened it, and saw it was a saving's bank.[44]

As noted in the introduction of this essay, one can safely assume that Bartleby's closed desk signifies his closed interiority. With "the key in open sight," the desk begs the narrator to peep into its deep recesses. Most important in this passage is

[40] Philip Koch, *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 45.
[41] Ibid., 31.
[42] Loren Graham, "The Power of Names: In Culture and Mathematics," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 157, 2 (2013), 229–34, 229.
[43] Rodolphe Gasché, "The 'Violence' of Deconstruction," *Research in Phenomenology*, 45 (2015), 169–90, 174. Gasché's discussion of the violent nature of names revolves around Jacques Derrida's argument about names in *Of Grammatology*. In the book, Derrida elaborates on the violent nature of naming: "To name, to give names that it will on occasion be forbidden to pronounce, such is the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute." Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 112.
[44] Melville, "Bartleby," 28.

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the narrator's assumption about an unquestionable right to open Bartleby's desk. "[T]he desk is mine," he says. The narrator thus justifies the act of looking into the desk, which stands as a metaphor for Bartleby's inner self. Reading "Bartleby" as a story about "private space," Milette Shamir argues that the eponymous character stands for "the refusal to turn private contents into a tradable story" and the "silent zone that is beyond articulation, perpetually unavailable to intimate exchange."[45] The narrator in the above passage is invading this "silent zone." Ironically enough, though, the narrator's effort to own Bartleby's interiority proves futile, because what he finds in the desk is "a saving's bank" that reveals nothing about Bartleby's inner thoughts. As if reflecting his capitalist compassion in a mirror, the narrator finds only money in return.[46]

## SECERET EMOTIONS: THE SILENCES OF BABO, BLACK GUINEA, AND BARTLEBY

The preceding discussion raises the question of how we as readers of literature in general can ever be free from the violence that contains the other's interiority within the institution of language. Virtually no reader of "Bartleby" is in a safe position to criticize the narrator with impunity, as reading the story itself involves one's imagination to fathom the interiority of this enigmatic character. Bartleby's silence makes the reader curious about what he thinks and feels. In pondering this question of readerly violence in Melville's works, "silence" becomes the key.[47] Melville's works include several characters like Bartleby,

[45] Milette Shamir, *Inexpressible Privacy: The Interior Life of Antebellum American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 10–11.

[46] "Bartleby" itself constitutes the narrator's effort to give some distinct, linguistic form to the narrator's feelings toward Bartleby's inscrutable existence. As Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion*, 52, observes, narrating a story is an act of anti-affect because it can be considered to belong to the realm of emotions: "affect as embodied intensity is more instinctive and immediate than any language-based act such as telling a story or having conversation. Discourse is identified with the conscious, the planned and the deliberate while affect is understood as the automatic, the involuntary, and the non-representational. Discourse and affect are seen as having an almost antagonistic relationship." Elizabeth Wissinger also argues, "The act of actualization is to assign meaning to an image, to delimit it, to bring it to the conscious plane of interpretation, as, for example, when affects are narrated as emotions, among other things." Elizabeth Wissinger, "Always on Display: Affective Production in the Modeling Industry," in Patricia Ticineto Clough, ed., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 231–60, 243–44.

[47] For an important discussion of silence in Melville's works see Shari Goldberg, *Quiet Testimony: A Theory of Witnessing from Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 87–119; Maurice S. Lee, "Melville's Subversive Political Philosophy: 'Benito Cereno' and the Fate of Speech," *American Literature*, 72, 3 (2000), 495–519.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001402 Published online by Cambridge University Press

silent characters whose interiority remains almost inaccessible to the reader. Among others, I would like to discuss Babo of "Benito Cereno" and Black Guinea of *The Confidence-Man*, as the silence of each of these characters urges consideration of the potential violence of language in relation to the other's interiority.

Toward the very end of "Benito Cereno," we find Babo, a ringleader of the revolt on a Spanish slave ship, stubbornly silent after he was sentenced to death for his alleged mutiny:

> Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect *seemed to say*, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words. Put in irons in the hold, with the rest, he was carried to Lima … Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, *unabashed*, the gaze of the whites.[48]

The narrator here intimates that Babo's silence is significant: his aspect "seems to say" something. The narrator in this tale does not do violence to the alterity of Babo's inner thoughts, but tries to fathom the meaning of the silence by attempting to translate it. The narrator does come close to getting inside the mind of Babo when he writes, "His aspect seemed to say." We can read three things here. First, through the linkage between Babo's silence and the verb "say," Babo's silence is likened to a language translatable into English. Second, with the verb "seemed," the narrator's translation is shown as uncertain and open to the possibility of failure. Finally, it is intimated that Babo's inscrutable silence is not empty but pregnant with something that he wants to say but withholds in his mind. The phrase "seemed to say" presupposes Babo's interior recesses. The result of the narrator's translation is "since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words," which is ultimately a failure, as the narrator does not have access to the original to be translated. At the very least, however, the phrase "seemed to say" leaves a small cleavage in Babo's seemingly impregnable, untranslatable silence, which encourages the reader to attempt to translate the untranslatable.[49]

In like manner, Black Guinea, a disabled beggar in *The Confidence-Man*, remains silent despite the harsh treatment he receives from the audience aboard the *Fidèle*:

[48] Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno" in Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces*, 46–117, 116; italics added.

[49] This paragraph on "Benito Cereno" is largely quoted from my previously published essay. See Yoshiaki Furui, "Transcending Distances: A Poetics of Acknowledgement in Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 44, 3 (2014), 450–70, 465–66.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817001402 Published online by Cambridge University Press

To be the subject of alms-giving is trying, and to feel in duty bound to appear cheerfully grateful under the trial, must be still more so; but whatever his *secret emotions*, he swallowed them, while still retaining each copper this side the esophagus. And nearly always he grinned, and only once or twice did he wince, which was when certain coins, tossed by more playful almoners, came inconveniently nigh to his teeth, an accident whose unwelcomeness was not unedged by the circumstance that the pennies thus thrown proved buttons.[50]

Pretending to be cheerful when begging for money, Black Guinea remains silent by swallowing his "secret emotions." As the passengers readily cast Black Guinea as an animal-like figure devoid of humanity, the mere object of a "game of charity," the narrator's eyes go deeper than Black Guinea's visible body, inquiring into his "secret emotions."[51] However, Black Guinea's "secret emotions" are never fully revealed to the reader. He "swallowed" his emotions. These secret emotions are only fleetingly revealed through his "wince," when the coins strike his face. There are several ways of interpreting this wince. He might, for example, be wincing at the humiliation of being pelted by the crowd, or at the recognition that some of the supposed coins are actually buttons. Yet his facial expression eludes any definite interpretation because, in this novel which destabilizes the correspondence between what appears and what is, the wince might be another theatrical performance of the confidence man. Thus the private, interior space of Black Guinea is left inscrutable and unreachable in a way that resonates with Babo's and Bartleby's enigmatic interiorities. Rather than articulating Black Guinea's secret emotions, *The Confidence-Man* only indexes his interiority, highlighting both its presence and its unknowability at once. This unknowability, however, does not indicate nihilism. Melville urges readers to suspend their judgment and to keep inquiring into Black Guinea's "secret emotions." This urge for suspension befits a novel that ends open-endedly: "Something further may follow of this Masquerade."[52]

The expressions "seemed to say" and "secret emotions" both gesture toward the existence of certain emotions hidden behind the inscrutable silences of Babo and Black Guinea. In Melville's works, silence does not represent a semantic void; rather, such an *ex*pression presupposes the rich *in*teriorities of silent characters. In both of the scenes quoted above, the characters' silences are shown to possess a certain degree of emotion. Babo is "unabashed," and

[50] Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, ed. Harrison Hayford et al. (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1984), 11–12; italics added. This paragraph on *The Confidence-Man* is largely quoted from my previously published essay. See Yoshiaki Furui, "Secret Emotions: Disability in Public and Melville's *The Confidence-Man*," *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies*, 15, 2 (2013), 54–68, 65–66. [51] Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 12. [52] Ibid., 251.

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Black Guinea harbors "secret emotions," which he is said to swallow. These descriptions point to secret interiors that resist categorization, naming, and containment, yet which nonetheless invite the reader to attempt to define. The reader is enticed, like the narrator who irresistibly opens Bartleby's desk, to know these interiors, but their silence never permits them to be violated. As Judith Butler phrases it, silence has the effect of "circumscrib[ing] a domain of autonomy that cannot or should not be intruded upon by the questioner."[53] In creating silent characters, Melville carves out interior spaces that are uncontainable by language. Put differently, in Melville's literary imagination, silence does not signify a flat surface without depth. Melville's commitment to depth can be elucidated through a contrast with Edgar Allan Poe. In his reading of Poe through the lens of affect theory, Adam Frank posits Poe's interest in "surface without depth":

> The people in Poe's prose romances tend to have nothing that readers skilled by realist writing would recognize as three-dimensional or well-rounded characters … Part of the peculiar power of Poe's writing has been its ability to *step away from privileging the depth side* of the opposition between surface and depth.[54]

Melville instead privileges the depth that lies beneath the seemingly empty surfaces of his silent characters.[55]

In a sense, the narrator of *The Confidence-Man* engages with the act of naming when he mentions Black Guinea's secret emotions. Yet this act differs significantly from what the narrator in "Bartleby" does to the titular character. While the suggestion of "secret emotions" speaks to the existence of certain emotions in Black Guinea, it ultimately leaves them undefined and unarticulated. Alternatively, the lawyer violently names what he believes Bartleby to be feeling: we have seen how his physical aloneness is devalorized as "loneliness." The suggestion of "secret emotions" both attracts and repels the reader. Herein lies the double strategy of naming and non-naming. In this instance, the act of naming is another way of leaving hidden what is hidden, but also makes its hiddenness visible to the reader. Bartleby's public silence, so to speak, entices the reader to access an inaccessible interiority. His existence is oxymoronic in that he is at once public and private, visible

[53] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 12.

[54] Frank, *Transferential Poetics*, 54–55; italics added.

[55] This refusal-of-depth model is typical of affect-oriented scholars. For instance, Wendy Ann Lee argues, "Thus, Bartleby cannot be made to move since there would be nothing to move … The evacuation of volition implied by Bartleby's motionlessness collapses the distinction between voluntary and involuntary motion … The lawyer's futile search for Bartleby's vital signs indicates *a disrupted relation between surface and depth*." Wendy Ann Lee, "The Scandal of Insensibility; or, the Bartleby Problem," *PMLA*, 130, 5 (2015), 1405–19, 1412; italics added.

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and invisible. In this sense, Milette Shamir is right in noting that Bartleby validates "the supraordinate right to privacy," presenting "the public sphere with the possibility of speaking about the private without violating it."[56]

If any desire to articulate the interiority of the other is tantamount to violence, the question remains whether the reader should abandon any attempt to read Bartleby's interiority. Critics have long noted the sheer impossibility of reading Bartleby's emotions. Throughout her study, Ngai repeatedly mentions the emotional illegibility of this character: "'Bartleby' foreground[s] the absence of a strong emotion where we are led to expect one, or turn[s] entirely on the interpretive problems posed by an emotional illegibility."[57] Furthermore, Ngai goes so far as to note that Melville's intent seems to "create a character so emotionally illegible as to foreclose the possibility of sympathetic identification altogether."[58] For a more classic example, Michael T. Gilmore notes, "The reader is never permitted access to the interior thoughts of [Bartleby] … the most impenetrable barrier of all is the one which stands between the curious reader and the private world of the scrivener."[59] However, a closer examination reveals Bartleby's interior to be slightly more open than it may at first appear to the reader. At least twice in the story, the narrator captures brief moments of Bartleby's emotional expressions: "the apparition of Bartleby appeared, in his shirt sleeves, and otherwise in a strangely tattered dishabille, saying quietly that he was sorry"; "'I would prefer to be left alone here,' said Bartleby, as if offended at being mobbed in his privacy."[60] These passages gesture toward the possibility of Bartleby having ugly feelings, such as being "sorry" and "offended." In other words, the detail of this text makes it impossible to categorically say that Bartleby's interiority is absolutely illegible and that he is an unfeeling man. In a recent article on "Bartleby," drawing on affect theory, Wendy Anne Lee argues that Bartleby is essentially an unfeeling subject: "Because one cannot guess what insensibles feel, there is no way of knowing what they will do … The unmoving, unfeeling subject challenges the model of emotions as causes, as accounts of how a moved body moves."[61] In Lee's attachment of such adjectives as "insensible" and "unfeeling" to Bartleby's interiority, it would not be far-fetched to say that she is exercising taxonomic power. To say that one does not feel anything is also to delimit and invade one's inner recesses. Even if Bartleby's interiority is not fully expressed, it is certainly and faintly

[56] Shamir, *Inexpressible Privacy*, 11. [57] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 10. [58] Ibid., 32.
[59] Gilmore, *American Romanticism*, 142. [60] Melville, "Bartleby," 26, 31.
[61] Lee, "The Scandal of Insensibility," 1408–9.

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adumbrated to the curious reader. Melville's way of indicating silent characters' emotions is less by articulation than by adumbration.

What is equally interesting about Bartleby, Babo, and Black Guinea is that the private interiorities of these characters are presupposed. The notion of a "private interiority," one that validates the private ownership of emotions, appears obsolete with the emergence of affect theory, which suggests one's emotions to be relational.[62] In her overview of affect theory, Sara Ahmed positions this assumption of private interiority as "the inside out model of emotions":

> The everyday language of emotion is based on the presumption of interiority. If I was thinking about emotions, I would probably assume that I need to look inwards, asking myself, "How do I feel?" … In a psychological model, I have feelings, and they are mine … Once what is inside has got out, when I have expressed my feelings in this way, then my feelings also become yours, and you may respond to them. If you sympathize, then we might have fellow-feeling … The logic here is that I have feelings, which then move outwards towards objects and others, and which might then return to me. I will call this the inside out model of emotions.[63]

Affect theory, however, has rendered this notion of private interiority outdated in suggesting emotions to be more relational, tending to affect another. As Michael Millner observes, "The long-held views of emotions as private, irrational, involuntary, or unconscious are now suspect."[64] However, Bartleby, Babo, and Black Guinea together present private interiorities that are inviolable by language. Although this view of interiority seems anachronistic given the recent surge of affect theory, the interiorities of these characters are radical in that they insist on maintaining a sense of privacy and individual nature in the extreme.

While showing characters who commit to absolute silence, Melville creates their interior spaces through such expressions as "seemed to say" and "secret emotions." As a writer more than aware of the potential violence of language, Melville is careful not to violate his characters' interiority. If recent studies on affect have contributed to the rediscovery of feelings outside the bounds of language, Melville stubbornly remained on the side of language, probing into the boundaries between the articulate and the inarticulate, the effable and the ineffable. As stated at the outset of this essay, one of the difficulties

[62] On this ownership of emotions, Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion*, 24, observes that an emotion "is a relation to others, a response to a situation and to the world. An emotion is above all a relational pattern and as such, I would say, is automatically distributed and located across the psychosocial field. Affect is never wholly owned, always intersecting and interacting."

[63] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 8–9.

[64] Michael Millner, *Fever Reading: Affect and Reading Badly in the Early American Public Sphere* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2012), 13.

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that arises when we use affect theory to read literature is that literature consists of words, whereas affect resides outside the linguistic realm. After more than a decade since the publication of Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*, affect theory, which works to locate feelings outside institutions, has itself become an institutionalized area of study. A significant paradox that arises when applying affect theory to literature is that, if we use the term "affect" to describe what remains inarticulate, inexplicable, and private in a text, "affect" necessarily offers the reader a catharsis of explanation. When we call the inexplicable "affect," we are mistakenly led to feel satisfied that the inexplicable has been given a name and that it has been explained away. The works of Melville examined in this essay, however, do not allow readers such an easy experience of catharsis, but hold them in an uncomfortable suspense between the explicable and the inexplicable, making them experience the ugly feeling of uncertain suspension. Readers are always kept at a distance from the interiorities of certain characters, while at the same time being invited to look into their pregnant silence. At least in the stories here discussed, Melville can be understood as an author who struggled to address the affective area of human beings – the area that resists containment and signification by the institution of affect theory – through the means of literary language.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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