

“ABOVE AND BENEATH CLASSIFICATION”

BARTLEBY, LIFE AND TIMES OF MICHAEL K, AND SYNTAGMATIC PARTICIPATION

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The history of the relation between the law, norm, or rule on the one hand and what forms an exception to that rule on the other is complex and multifaceted.¹ In the most general terms, one could posit that the exception is that which escapes from the rule. Thus, confronted with the strangeness of Michael K, his noncommunicativeness, his odd combination of meekness and intransigence, the medical officer in J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* assigns K a place “above and beneath classification” [Coetzee 151]. Michael K is at once too large and too small to fit into the administrative and humanitarian categories that pertain at the prisoner camp. He appears to the medical officer—whose good intentions and patient, selfless interest in K cannot be doubted—as a recalcitrant, nonidentifiable object that flirts with dehumanization. To put it in Bataille's terms, Michael K is formless (*informe*), and his existence can, by mere virtue of that fact, be called scandalous.²

Let us take a closer look at the expression “above and beneath classification.” We can note that (1) it names something that situates itself on the outside of any classification; (2) this something must have a paradoxical status, since it is at once *above* and *beneath* classification; (3) the nonclassifiable is regarded as such from a classifying perspective. Although the latter point may sound tautological, it nonetheless touches upon one of the most difficult dimensions of the exception: if the exception is always an exception to the rule, how can it exist otherwise than by virtue of that rule? how can it be more than just the rule's negative? But if the exception radically breaks away from the rule, then how is it possible for that rule to identify the exception and recognize it as such? This crucial problem has formed the basis for reflection on the relation between rule and exception. Freud, for instance, saw the exception (crime) as constitutive of social ties and the social order. Lacan needed a special topology to show the *extimate* character of what is at once inside and outside the symbolic order [Lacan, Miller]. Religious ways of thinking could be said to have located the exception as transcendent to any human order. For Badiou, the secularization of the infinite cannot be thought apart from an immanent, rather than transcendent, event that is disruptive of all order. In Derrida's subtle analyses, the originary supplement appears as both constitutive and deconstructive. Agamben regards the exception as having become the political rule. These interpretative frameworks, in spite of some deep distinctions, all show not only that the rule cannot do without the exception, but that the exception is just as dependent on the rule. Even when the exception is regarded as a kind of pure, ruleless being-as-such, the rule is at the very least *conceptually* indispensable for this pure, mere being to be thinkable in the first place. In brief, however much one may want, for political or other reasons, to assign the exception a central place at the expense of the rule, that rule remains inescapable.

Nonetheless, the inevitability of the rule should not lead us to conclude that it is also

immutable, nor that we should adopt a conservatism that accepts the rule as a repressive normativity or as an inclusive and exclusive apparatus of judgment. That this is as impossible as it is undesirable is suggested by what we indicated under the second item: the exception is both above and beneath. The exception is the paradoxical given of that which at once escapes from existing categories and lacks all identity in that escape. The problem that Michael K and Bartleby, the second figure of exception we consider in this essay, present for the rule resides not just in the recalcitrance that allows them to show up the limits of the rule, but also in the doubling with which this goes hand in hand. Michael K and Bartleby are as pliant as they are obdurate, show great loyalty even as they insist on an antisocial faithlessness, stick to their guns in an infuriating manner, yet are susceptible to the accident of a chance encounter. To sum up, they lack any clear “self”; they are at once something and nothing, a fact that precisely enables them to appear to us as highly singular.

Within the scope of this essay we can only indicate in summary fashion the general problem of the interrelation of rule and exception. We do not aim to solve this problem or even to give it a new turn. What we propose to do is concentrate on how this problem affects literature and in particular how literature is read. In such a context the rule goes by the name of “allegorical reading” and the exception by that of “singularity.” Our thesis is that the desire to do justice to the singularity encountered in the literary text cannot be met by an outdated humanism that regards literature as a vessel through which moral values are passed on from author to reader, nor by a more contemporary plea that the reader identify with the multiplicity of perspectives or the flesh-and-blood “others” that literature presents to them. In our view, it is rather that, by *participating* in the world staged in the text, readers not so much identify with a perspective that was unfamiliar to them before but experience a condition divorced from any perspective, or, to put this more cautiously, undergo a singular perspective that is in the process of being formed.

As we will go on to show in more detail, some attempts to combine a respect for the singular with a critique of what is qualified as allegorical result in a weak (and even suspect) indication of the universally human that literature supposedly gives access to. And what else to expect when one tries to read the literary text for that which is located beyond any specific feature or allegorical meaning? As we see it, it should be possible to do justice to the singular without throwing the allegorical overboard, since the allegorical is quite simply unavoidable. All literature, logically speaking, starts with a metaphor. This is what Lacan calls the function of the beautiful: the beautiful is, next to the good, a signifier that creates a necessary distance between word and thing, between what is represented and what remains absent in that representation [Lacan 00]. The metaphorical functioning of the beautiful, in this case literature, necessarily produces an allegorical impulse in the beholder or reader. A signifier provokes the question of what it could possibly refer to, even if the question remains unanswered—even if it is exactly the function of the beautiful to provoke this question and yet ensure that it be left unanswered or in suspension. Then again, literature does not exist purely by the grace of a metaphorical operation that creates and maintains a distance between beauty and what that beauty veils. A crucial dimension of literature’s singularity is that it weaves a story around the “hole” that metaphor both creates and covers over. This aspect can be regarded as metonymical, or as what Lacan calls the (syntagmatic) string of signifiers. To the extent that literature’s metaphorical dimension stimulates an allegorical reading (and thus forgets and disrespects the exceptional), the fate of the singular could be said to be tied up with the metonymical. A story’s metonymical dimension testifies to the selflessness of the literary “object.”

There is of course a general consensus that literature is not a “container” of ideas, moral lessons, or commentaries on existing political situations. We all realize that to understand literature that way would be to miss what truly makes it literature. Yet, if there

is a consensus about what literature is not, it has proved more difficult to reach unanimity about what it is. Derek Attridge's recent and forceful attempts to determine what he has called literature's *singularity* may serve as a good basis to demonstrate this difficulty. Attridge has argued for a type of reading that does not reduce literature to an allegory of meaning. Literature is not something that simply exists—waiting for a theoretician who will use it as an illustration or for a reader who will only understand what he or she already knows—but is an *event*, something that brings something new into a given situation. This singularity does not turn literature into something that is altogether irrelevant for theory. On the contrary, precisely because it escapes, or at least resists, interpretive schemes, literature forces the reader to question them.

Although we share Attridge's suspicion of allegorical modes of reading, we question his nonallegorical alternative, in particular as he elaborates it with regard to Coetzee. The problem, as we see it, is that this alternative relies heavily on a process of identification between readers and protagonists that actually amounts to a variation on the allegorical theme. In Gilles Deleuze's reading of Melville's *Bartleby* we find the building blocks of what we regard as a more persuasive nonallegorical alternative, that of readers' syntagmatic participation in the text rather than paradigmatic identification with protagonists.

In the first part of this essay we examine a reading that refuses to be allegorical, only to find itself elaborating what amounts to a superallegory of the paradigmatically human with which readers must identify. We counter this threat by drawing attention to what we see as the reader's syntagmatic participation in the text—a process that inevitably relies on allegorical modes of interpretation, and that does not deny the dissemination typical of literature. A metonymical reading of this type takes place in the absence of a metaphorical identity. Both *Bartleby* and *Life and Times of Michael K* take the reader to the point of "nakedness" or the absence of particular features—"I am not particular," *Bartleby* says. In order to begin to conceptualize this sort of dispersed and constantly moving literary life, the final part of the essay turns to Deleuze.

1

In *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Derek Attridge points out that Coetzee's novels have produced a plethora of allegorical readings. The presence of enigmatic characters like Michael K and the lack of a precise context in which they appear seems to have prompted reader upon reader to look for a hidden significance beneath the surface of the text. His chapter on *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K* argues against such an allegorizing impulse, by showing up the limitations both of the attempt to look for universal truths about "the human condition" and of the desire to unearth references to specific South African situations. In either case one takes the text to be telling more and something different than what can be concluded from a "superficial" or what Attridge calls a literal or literary reading. The chapter is suitably entitled "Against Allegory."

Attridge's major argument is that when we talk, write, or teach about literature, we shift into a mode that fails to do justice to the event of reading literature, an event that upon each repetition is slightly different, that arises in the interaction between reader and text, and is thus inevitably interimplicated with the history that exists beyond the text. It is in making the latter point that Attridge distinguishes his take most clearly from that of liberal humanists or New Critics. He wants "a close reading that takes account of [subsequent] developments, including an openness to alterity, an acknowledgment of the historical and cultural situatedness of both writing and reading, a responsiveness to the work as invention, a sensitivity to the mediations through which we experience the world, and

a registering of the event of the text in a performance of its own stagings of language's multiple powers" [Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee* 62]. Here Attridge zooms in on two passages from *Waiting for the Barbarians*, one that is thematically pivotal, and another that is not. For both he tries to offer a nonallegorical reading.

In the first case, this is arguably more difficult to do. The passage is located at the point when "the barbarian girl, partially blinded by her torturers, has been left behind in the town as a beggar, and the Magistrate has brought her into his apartment" [43]. An allegorical account of the passage, Attridge suggests,

would probably focus on the fact that this is one of many passages that signal the novel's insistence on the self-deceptions of the liberal conscience, in [sic] the thinness of the dividing line between overt repression achieved by violent methods and the subtler forms of oppression produced by laissez-faire attitudes, the pursuit of personal gratifications, and an unwillingness to rock the boat. The fascination with the body that characterizes erotic attachment cannot, the novel tells us, be separated from the fascination of the body evident in the torture chamber. [43]

While Attridge regards such observations as quite valid, he exclaims about how far they fall short of "the experience of reading the passage, especially in the context of the novel" [43]. And he registers regret over the fact that there does not seem to be a "critical vocabulary that will do justice to the multiple, simultaneous, changing effects of a passage like this" [44]. All he can try to do is "present in somewhat prosaic terms a few of the events—intellectual, affective, and physical—that may occur in an engaged reading" [44]. What is striking about what follows is the extent to which Attridge highlights a continuity between the reader's experience and the protagonist's. In the very first sentence of his presentation, he points out that, "[e]ncouraged by the present tense and first person, we undergo, along with the Magistrate, the complex unfolding of feelings and associations" [44]. "We sense his own awareness that he is playing out the standard rituals of seduction," Attridge notes next: "We are conscious—as he is—of a history of sexual exploitation" that lies behind this scene. "But the denial that follows ('This is not what you think it is'): is this the standard seducer's lie? Yes and no . . . Neither the Magistrate nor the reader knows."

Something rather strange is happening by this point. We have seen Attridge deplore what gets lost when a reading is merely allegorical—when it uses the literal only as a means of access to a rational, often underlying, meaning: we have seen him critique the flattening tendency that universalizes the meaning of literary works as emblems of the human condition; we have seen him question the obverse movement whereby a literary text becomes merely typical of its specific place and time. But in the alternative Attridge proposes, readers are, surprisingly, supposed to resist either of these two basic allegorizing moves by, in effect, undertaking a third, in which they themselves become flattened out for the moment of the reading, completely identifying with the Magistrate, wholly sharing his experience, allowing what happens to him to happen to them: "the sudden vulnerability of the [barbarian girl's] exposed throat, the surge of erotic attraction, the obscurity of the impulses that make themselves known—these are elements in the reader's experience as well as the Magistrate's. And that complex of feelings, that momentary complicity with something dark and destructive, as something that happens to the reader, is more significant testimony to the power and distinctiveness of literature, and to the brilliance of Coetzee's art, than any extracted moral about the errors of liberal humanism" [45]. That there is something strained about Attridge's proposed solution to the problem of allegorical reading becomes further apparent when he insists, on the one hand, that in

the type of literal reading he is advocating the text “comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place, conditioned by a specific history, go through” [39], while suggesting, on the other hand, that if there is “no guarantee” that his reading of the passage about the barbarian girl “coincides with the way anyone else experiences this passage . . . [,] after many conversations about Coetzee’s fiction, after reading many responses to it, I know there’s a good chance that others have experienced something like this . . .” [45]. It is, to say the least, curious that an argument which subjects allegorical reading to critical scrutiny on the basis of its universalizing and localizing effects—which are thought, cogently enough, to deny the singularity of literature—ends up inviting the reader into the text on a basis that is both universalizing (we have all experienced something like this) and localizing (this type of reading can only ever be a temporally and geographically unique event).

As we see it, the key problem with Attridge’s way of defending the singularity of literature from the detrimental effects of various types of allegorizing is that it insists on a process of identification between reader and protagonist, and that it is less than obvious how such identification is supposed to promote in the reader that singular “openness to alterity” that Attridge so highlights in explicating how his type of close reading differs from traditional versions. Take his account of the second scene from the *Barbarians* he zooms in on, a passage that is not thematically pivotal, but instead describes time passing, as the Magistrate “stare[s] out over the square where the wind chases flurries of dust. Two little boys are playing with a hoop. They bowl it into the wind. It rolls forward, slows, teeters, rides back, falls. The boys lift their faces and run after it, the hair whipped back from their clean brows” [*Barbarians* 27, qtd. in Attridge 46]. Attridge, quite persuasively, argues that the importance of a passage such as this is missed in the type of allegorical interpretation whose poverty he wants to expose. “To allegorize is to translate the temporal and the sequential into the schematic: a set of truths, a familiar historical scene” [46]. What happens here, he says, is that readers “sense . . . the passing of time not just as a fact enunciated but an experience lived through” [46]. Fair enough. But is it necessary to elide the difference between reader and protagonist quite as starkly as to go on to write that we experience “both the emptiness of a day without further contact with the girl, about whom *we and our alter ego in the fiction* have many more questions to ask, and the feeling of seasonal change so important in the novel . . .” [46, emphasis added]? Or to conclude this section by noting that “the inability to draw any more specific conclusion is experienced both by the Magistrate . . . and by the reader” [47]? Such a stress on the seamless continuity between “hero” and reader forms an odd juxtaposition to the “sensitivity to the mediations through which we experience the world” that Attridge calls for when he summarizes the nature of a reading that would be respectful of the singularity of literature [62]. What happens to the mediation that is the Magistrate when we are completely oblivious to his presence and see the world of the barbarian girl through his/our eyes only?

The limitations of Attridge’s alternative to allegorical reading become even more apparent when he turns to *Life and Times of Michael K*. Now it is K with whom the reader is supposed to identify so that the event of Attridge’s literal reading might take place.

[I]t is important to stress that the reading experience that I am trying to describe is one of continuous engagement, of the texture of a singular consciousness sustained with remarkable consistency. (This is why the medical officer’s section of Michael K hits us with such a shock when we reach it—though it too quickly engages us with a contrasting consciousness.) Sentences that grip, tantalize, or explode occur on every page, not as exercises in fine writing but as invitations to apprehend ways of being outside, but highly relevant to, the comfortable patterns of our daily lives. [60–61, emphasis added]

There is much in this sketch that we would subscribe to. The final characterization in particular expresses well what a form of reading might look like that respects the singularity of literature while seeking to find in it ways of apprehending alterity. But why is it necessary to insist on the idea that such an effect can only result from a process of engaging with one vessel of consciousness (or two)? Why must an account of literature that would subvert the dominance of the allegorical—of that meaning-seeking impulse that substitutes various forms of the familiar for the true foreignness of the literary text and its superficial texture—why must such an account substitute a continuity between the reader's (familiar) consciousness and that of one or more characters for an apprehension of the latter's otherness?

We agree wholeheartedly with Attridge that the singularity of literature demands a “responsive reading, an immersion in the text” so that we “participate in, and perhaps are changed by, this complex understanding of hope and fear, illusion and disillusionment,” as he puts it in summing up his literal/literary reading of *Barbarians*. But we feel we must disagree, just as unequivocally, with Attridge's assumption that a responsive reading and an immersion of this type require an identification between the reader and a central character—that they rely upon our ability to place ourselves in some sort of continuity with the consciousness of a protagonist. Such an understanding of the relation between reader and character seems peculiarly metaphorical, foregrounding as it does a willingness to think of oneself as interchangeable with one or another protagonist—to elide, for the time of the reading, any real differences between oneself and that protagonist, just as a metaphor, when successful, creates the illusion of an identity between tenor and vehicle on the basis of a (selective) ground that is accepted for the duration of the figure of speech. The parallel is peculiar because, before the late eighteenth century attempted to impose a stringent distinction between the two, allegory was regarded as simply an extended form of metaphor, a point of view that has never gone completely away (cf. Rosamund Tuve's dictum that “Allegoria does not use metaphor; it is one”)³ and that has, of late, enjoyed a remarkable resurgence: “The earlier rhetorical tradition saw allegory, correctly, as part of the natural continuum of metaphorical expression.”⁴ Both allegory and metaphor derive from a fundamental paradigmatic impulse, which specializes in finding similarity in spite of difference, differences in spite of similarities. Seen in this light, Attridge cannot escape from the allegorizing/metaphorizing tendency that he is aiming to expose in his account of the singularity of literature. He cannot do so because, if he tropologically classifies the mode of reading he rejects as allegorical, he does not adequately consider what the tropological classification would be of the alternative he proposes. In insisting so heavily on what strikes us as an implicitly metaphorical continuity between readers and protagonists, Attridge misses an opportunity to realize the full potential of his challenge to allegorizing readings.

In our view, Attridge's account of the singularity of the literary text is at its most successful when it highlights aspects of a novel like *Life and Times* to which our relationship as readers is, in tropological terms, metonymical rather than metaphorical, in structuralist terms: syntagmatic rather than paradigmatic. Such aspects are well summarized by him as “the rich and sometimes apparently quite contingent details of the text” [48], “the air we breathe while we are absorbing the words” [59]. They include the “powerful physical depictions” that he foregrounds, for instance in the passage from *Barbarians* that we quoted here [48]. We share Attridge's sense that these are “some of the qualities of the novel that are unaccounted for by an allegorical reading [that wants] to move to parallels outside the world of the book” [48]. But we would argue that “all of these attributes” [48] constitute the syntagmatic hooks that enable readers' eyes to become attached to a narrative *without needing to identify paradigmatically with any one character in particular*. If readers are

truly to do justice to the singularity of literature as Attridge quite rightly argues they ought to, then they should find a means of relating *to the text* rather than identifying with the dominant consciousness at any given point of the text.

In his account of *Life and Times of Michael K* Attridge regularly notes the many ways in which this novel resists any easy identification between the reader and the eponymous character. But his overall perspective firmly remains that, if this resistance makes it impossible to derive an “ethical lesson from K’s condition,” we can still “return from living through it in a reading to the world of obligation, to that ‘other time’ which is ours, with a changed sense of its status” [56]. The act of reading, here and elsewhere, is presented as a “living through” the protagonist’s “condition.” It is only by leaving our own time, entering into that “‘other time,’” it is only by exchanging, for the duration of the reading, our own self for that of K that we will be able to return to our own time and self in an altered fashion.⁵ This is certainly a tantalizing perspective. It speaks to the romantic sense of the transformative effect of literature. But it is seriously flawed both as an account of what reading *Life and Times* is actually like and as a way of explaining the singularity of literature. Attridge is too good a close reader not to be seduced into observations that actually undercut the thrust of his identificatory-transformative account of the relation between reader and character. One of the first peculiarities of *Life and Times* that he notes is that it does not just avoid first-person narration but also “makes only intermittent use of free indirect discourse, the technical device apparently most suited to conveying an individual’s inner world while remaining in the third person . . .” [49–50]. In this way, Coetzee is said “to sustain throughout the fiction the otherness of K’s responses: although we learn in moving detail of his thought-processes and emotions, we never feel that we have assimilated them to our own” [50]. Exactly. But why doesn’t Attridge’s theoretical account of the relation between reader and fiction leave any clear space for such an unassimilable experience? Why is so little done, structurally, with the entirely apt finding that there are many sentences in this novel “that begin as statements about K’s mental world but which carry on in language that hardly seems his” [50]? Or with the noted “sense that this is a character whom we can’t easily pretend that we know” [51]? Why is nothing really made of the fact that we engage “with K’s mental process while registering the strangeness of this attitude” [53–54], and that the “rhythm of the clauses, the quasi-philosophical speculation . . . are not K’s” [54]?

What makes the experience of reading *Life and Times* a truly singular event is precisely the fact that we are invited to enter the world inhabited by K, while remaining fundamentally unable to share his own experience of that world. The medical officer’s attempts at reading K do not merely constitute a warning against the type of allegorizing reading that Attridge critiques; they also show us the misguidedness of attempting to identify with K, as the medical officer systematically does. Coetzee’s readers do not relate paradigmatically to the otherness that the world of the novel presents them with; they try instead to relate syntagmatically to that exceptional quality. That is to say, they enter the world of the novel as participants in their own right (not as temporary substitutes for one of the characters or for the narrative consciousness), who engage in an event of reading, not in one of virtual living.

2

In a second move, we wish to turn to Deleuze’s reading of *Bartleby*. This choice was prompted by a fairly throwaway suggestion in Hardt and Negri’s instant classic, *Empire*, that there is a similarity between the characters of Bartleby and Michael K. Though brief, the five paragraphs (in italic font) in which this parallel is touched upon are inserted at a

crucial place within the book, namely in between the detailed analysis of the workings of empire and a first attempt at bringing a counterempire to light [Hardt and Negri 203–04]. Under the heading of *Refusal* the reader is presented with a laudatory account of the two characters and their mysterious yet stubborn refusal of what is being offered to them as reasonable demands and advice worthy of consideration. Both Bartleby and Michael K seem to be guided by preoccupations they cannot communicate, at least not in a way that would allow for careful negotiation. As Bartleby and Michael K are so deeply characterized by this refusal, they appear as men “without qualities,” as mere men and nothing more, situating themselves at the level of naked universality. The authors note that it is precisely because of this association with bare and simple being that the case of Bartleby has attracted attention from such philosophers as Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze.⁶

Despite the sympathy with which Hardt and Negri write about Bartleby and Michael K, the reader is immediately warned that their refusal is empty and suicidal. A true liberatory politics might originate in a “no” but cannot remain stuck to it. In that sense they repeat the basic thesis of Albert Camus’s *Man in Revolt*: the opposing “no” on which a revolution is based (for instance, against a class society) should be accompanied by an affirmation (such as equality), or its only result will be pure destruction. As Hardt and Negri put it: “This refusal certainly is the beginning of a liberatory politics, but it is only a beginning. The refusal itself is empty. Bartleby and Michael K may be beautiful souls, but their being in its absolute purity hangs on the edge of an abyss” [204].

With Attridge’s critique of allegorical reading in mind, we must note that Hardt and Negri pay attention only to the allegorical function of these texts and disregard the experience of reading Coetzee’s novel or Melville’s tale, an experience that ideally draws us into “unfamiliar emotional and cognitive territory,” as Attridge would put it [43]. Hardt and Negri’s summary of Bartleby and K as “beautiful souls” is precisely the type of allegorizing “reminder of what we already know” that Attridge would have us avoid [43]. However, Hardt and Negri’s qualification of Bartleby and Michael K as “mere men and nothing more” does go some way toward providing a basis for resisting the type of identificatory reading that we see as a poor alternative to the allegorical.

There is, furthermore, a less accidental ground for reading Bartleby and Michael K together. Chapter 2 of *Life and Times of Michael K* parallels Melville’s tale in one—for us, crucial—respect. The medical officer’s diary fragments and notes on his encounter with the person he knows as “Michaels” (Michael K) bear a strong resemblance to the lawyer’s report of his experiences with Bartleby. In both cases, what is at stake is an account of the obstruction that characters such as Bartleby and Michael K constitute for the well-meaning attempts at interpretation and action that both the medical officer and the lawyer undertake. Both are conscious of the fact that they cannot understand this strange, resistant presence in their lives. Indeed, their story consists in the very act of reporting on this failure to understand.

A further parallel between chapter 2 of *Life and Times* and *Bartleby* is the first-person narrative perspective, which, certainly at first sight, encourages the reader to identify with the narrator (the other two chapters of *Life and Times* are narrated in the third person and mostly use Michael K as a focalizer, to whose thoughts we have only limited access, however). Indeed, many readers and critics have felt encouraged by this mediated narrative situation to develop an allegorical reading of this strange character of Bartleby.⁷ He has been seen variously as a mystical saint, a wayward nihilist, and a rebellious proletarian; his story as a biblical parable, the report of a psychoanalytic cure, an allegory of writing, and so on. *Life and Times* explicitly stages this allegorizing tendency, and, in doing so, makes us wary of indulging in it, even while we realize that an allegorizing impulse can never be completely resisted. The moment in Coetzee’s novel where this problem is tackled most clearly occurs when the medical officer is addressing a letter to “Michaels”—a

letter that will remain unsent:

Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. Did you not notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away? I noticed. [166]

Reading *Bartleby* alongside *Life and Times* is a productive exercise because it helps clarify the issues that surround the seductions of allegorical reading. In particular, Deleuze's account of *Bartleby* is oriented toward an ethics of reading that has a lot of common ground with Attridge's plea for the singularity of literature, yet that may assist us in steering clear of a metaphorical-identificatory understanding of the relation between reader and text that risks being collapsed once more into an allegorical mode.

3

Attridge's antiallegorical argument that we fail to do justice to literature to the extent that we look to it merely for reminders "of what we already know" [43] runs parallel to Deleuze's insistence that literature constitutes an encounter (*rencontre*), rather than an act of recognition (*reconnaître*). Deleuze is strongly opposed to any reading that looks for a hidden meaning or, in the language of structuralist linguistics, the *signified* of a text. This kind of reading takes the text to be a box referring to an inside in which something is hidden. Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular is, for Deleuze, a perverse or corrupted way of reading, for he regards it as even worse to look for the *signifier* of the text [Deleuze, *Pourparlers* 17]. Leaving aside this heated debate, it is clear that the important place literature occupies within Deleuze's work is not due to any desire to track down edifying or humanist significances whilst reading a novel or a poem.⁸

In his "Bartleby; or, The Formula" [68–90] Deleuze decisively dismisses any allegorizing reading right from the start: "'Bartleby' is neither a metaphor for a writer nor the symbol of anything whatsoever. It is a violently comical text, and the comical is always literal. . . . It means only what it says, literally" [68]. At the center of Deleuze's analysis is "what it says": the infamous *formula* "I would prefer not to." This emphasis is in line with Deleuze's understanding of texts as *material*: they are not constructions based on a specific (allegorical) meaning, but (literal-material) *productions* in or through which something happens. "One considers a book to be an a-signifying machine; the only problem is to know whether it functions and how it functions" [Deleuze, *Pourparlers* 17]. This functioning is not the narrative, plot, or sequence of events of which a character is the agent or object. Rather, Deleuze focuses on the character as a break with a given order. Thus, in *Bartleby*, the lawyer (and narrator) ends his story with the sigh: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!," but we do not need to read this as if Bartleby reveals some universally human aspect, which we could all recognize. Bartleby is not the particular concretization of a universal, human truth. In the sigh, Bartleby and humanity are juxtaposed and the lawyer's sigh comments on the strange encounter with someone who could not be reduced to "humanity." The lawyer has survived this encounter but only at the cost of choosing against Bartleby and for an already familiar humanity.⁹ He has, in other words, replaced encounter with recognition. Our job as readers, we could speculate (Deleuze does not make this point explicit), is to allow the encounter to take place.

This is not an easy task. If the story of Bartleby and the lawyer is the story of a missed encounter, that is in large part because Bartleby is, using a distinction made by

Deleuze in his essay on Francis Bacon, a figure but not figurative. He is an isolated figure who lacks any bond, be it with fellow men, himself, his past, or his future. He has nothing to do with particular conditions like “family” or “education”—he is, indeed, “not particular”; he lacks all particularity. About *Bartleby himself*, so the lawyer-narrator tells us right from the start, one cannot tell a thing. “He is an irreparable loss to literature.” This ironical turn is taken seriously by Deleuze. If *Bartleby* is not a novel, striking, or captivating character, this is only because he is a true “original.” Surprisingly, Deleuze—who is well known for his theory of the *simulacrum*, that is, of copies without formative original or model—makes a lot of this expression, which he adopts from Melville’s *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857). In chapter 44 of this novel Melville refers to “originals” that are to be differentiated from peculiar or striking characters. A true “original” “is like a revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all round it—everything is lit by it, everything starts up to it [. . .] so that, in certain minds, there follows upon adequate conception of such a character, an effect, in its way, akin to that which Genesis attends upon the beginning of things” [Melville 205]. To the extent that literature loses a striking character and a story because of a true original’s presence, it gains originality and movement. These “true” originals are neither general nor particular, for they escape established knowledge and defy every psychology.¹⁰ Even the words they utter exceed the laws of language, “since they are like the vestiges or projections of a unique, original language [*langue*], and bring all of language [*langage*] to the limit of silence and music” [83].

This language belongs to no one, and it addresses itself to no one in particular. In brief, it is a language without a language community. Thus, *Bartleby*’s formula “I would prefer not to” introduces a strange logic of preference within a context that is actually supposed to be about the giving or receiving of orders. If the formula is perhaps not quite agrammatical (Deleuze is of two minds about this [68–69]), its mannered form and its indefiniteness—what is it that *Bartleby* would prefer not to do, and what is it he would like to do?—drive his boss and colleagues to distraction. What is more, they, too, unwittingly start to take up the turn of phrase “*prefer to*.” When *Bartleby* repeats his predictable but mysterious phrase he leaves his listeners in a state of perplexity. However, if *Bartleby* is in the grips of the formula, he is so in another, more consequential way than his audience. The utterance for him is neither an affirmation nor a negation: “he would prefer not to,” but not to do . . . what? “The formula is devastating because it eliminates the preferable just as mercilessly as any nonpreferred” [71]. Any reference to an object—that is, the task or action he does or does not want to do—disappears. According to Deleuze, *Bartleby*’s formula carves an alien language within language. It makes language stutter and creates “cavities of non-communication.” It drives language to its own border, to an outside that is not external to language but immanent to it. What Deleuze means with these cavities of noncommunication can be derived from his *Logic of Sense*, where he invokes stoic logic in order to determine what *sense* is.

For the Stoics, everything that exists is a body. “Body” is a capacious category that also embraces such items as the “soul” or “virtue.” These *corporeals* interact, operating as causes with regard to one another. There is, strictly speaking, nothing outside these bodies. Nonetheless, the Stoa leaves room for persistent or insistent effects, the so-called *uncorporeals* that situate themselves at the surface of bodies. An example that Deleuze cites is a tree that turns green. The “greening” of the tree is purely a surface phenomenon. The tree’s “greening” or “turning green” is neither an existing quality of the tree, nor does it add anything to the tree’s “being.” Rather, it is a transient effect that cannot be caught in any description. This type of “sense effect” or “uncorporeal” is expressed, so the Stoics thought, in verbal forms, such as “greening.” These verbs do not refer to states of affairs or things, but express what happens, or more precisely what is happening and what will therefore never be. That which is, which belongs to the order of “being,” is the

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bodies. Nouns and adjectives indicate these bodies. What happens, by contrast, belongs to the order of becoming and can only be captured by verbs. It is for this reason that the Stoics' concept of time is split into two dimensions: the dimension of things, bodies and their attributes, that is, the present time of Chronos, and the dimension of happening and becoming, or Aion, the limitless future and past of the incorporeals.¹¹

We are now closer to determining what a true Deleuzian encounter between reader and text could look like. We have seen how Deleuze discovers a *true* original in Bartleby and how, within a literary universe, language gets affected by Bartleby's formula and opens itself up to a new language. As Rancière observes in *The Flesh of Words*, Deleuze consistently uses musical or affective notions to characterize this new language within language. In the case of Sacher-Masoch a *murmur* can be heard; Isabel (a character from *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*) produces a hardly audible, angelic *whispering*; and Gregor Samsa *squeaks* and *shrieks*. This musical-affective language is not so much located outside existing language as it detaches itself from it, just as the sense effect cannot do without corporeal causes but appears as an excess with regard to them. Similarly, Bartleby's *formula* flirts with an agrammatical relation to language and functions within the existing grammatical and communicative mode of language as an excessive supplement. It constitutes a cavity of noncommunication, impenetrable to the kind of rational discourse that the lawyer employs, and it appears as a persistent and insistent sense effect, constantly in the act of happening, without ever touching firm ground—what is it Bartleby would (not) prefer?—instead suspended in an eternal Aion of becoming.

Thus, in a true encounter, the reader will not see the text “as a locus of meaning that awaits interpretation, nor as a point of subjectification” [Vrijders 115]. Rather, in a Deleuzian ethics of reading, “criticism and fiction are no longer separate fields, but constantly exchange affects, undergoing mutual processes of becoming” [Vrijders 115]. Bartleby's formula constitutes one such sense effect that stimulates an exchange of affect: it constantly invites and resists interpretation; Michael K's refusal to communicate, to explain himself, another. Both characters strongly resist an allegorical reading, and the texts in which they appear stage what happens when allegory gets provoked. The tendency to understand (help, empathize with, . . .) gets obstructed, and this very obstruction carries the tendency to its conclusion. Both in *Bartleby* and in the second chapter of *Life and Times*, the “figure” disappears, abandoning the first-person narrator to his own best intentions: the charitable impulse manifested by both narrators is incapable of truly dealing with the obstruction thrown up by the figures. This is because the Bartleby's charity is a way of avoiding a genuine exchange of affect. Put differently, such charity amounts to an attempt to reduce a character that belongs to the temporal realm of Aion to that of Chronos. In both cases this is clear in the emphasis on how poor the diet is on which the original figure subsists, for instance, and on the narrators' attempts to intervene in this respect.

Both narrators in this way serve as a warning against an identificatory mode of reading that proceeds on the basis of *readers' affectively projecting themselves, their needs, and their expectations onto protagonists*. With Deleuze, we would argue that a genuine encounter with the text involves an exchange of affect, rather than the affective projection that is implicit in acts of identification and which involves a flattening out of the obstacle that characters such as Bartleby and Michael K place in our way. Such an exchange can only be successful when the text's language-within-language is attended to and when readers participate syntagmatically in the world of the text, occupying a position of contiguity with regard to protagonists rather than arrogating unto themselves an identity that is derived from the latter's particularity. Admittedly, the special nature of the protagonists that are at the heart of the two works of fiction we have examined facilitates such a metonymical relationship. In apprehending Bartleby one is brought to the point where it is a “mere man” that appears to us, devoid of any identifiable characteristics (*I am not partic-*

ular). As to Michael K, we saw Attridge note how the narrative perspective makes it difficult for the reader to enter into K's thoughts and emotions. The bulk of *Life and Times*, moreover, is made up not of the scene of K's confinement to the sick bay at Kenilworth, but of his seminomadic existence, setting down only the most tentative of roots in Cape Town (especially in the abandoned apartment of the couple his mother used to serve), and at Prince Albert (at what may or may not have been the farm his mother grew up on), but nowhere achieving a permanent habitat, nowhere settling down to "the" meaning of life. Thus, our ability to relate to K is dependent on a willingness to join in his peregrinations, not, we would claim, as travelers that follow in his footsteps, let alone as ones that have exchanged our own for his, but possibly as ones that try to keep up as best we can with the pace he chooses to travel at, observing, witnessing his life and times, opening ourselves up to the unsettling effect of such a character and the affective exchange its experiences require. This is where the true singularity of literature lies: it creates a world that comes alive anew upon each reading by virtue of the fact that each reader can occupy a place of his or her own within its realm, bringing to life, on this syntagmatic basis, the dead letters and heroes that lurk in its pages.

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1. *In what follows, we do not engage with any possible distinctions between law, norm, and rule, opting instead for "rule" as the most general, or least marked, term.*

2. *For the Bataillean notion of the formless see Bois and Krauss.*

3. *"Allegoria does not use metaphor; it is one. By definition a continued metaphor, allegoria exhibits the normal relation of concretion to abstraction found in metaphor, in the shape of a series of particulars with further meanings. Each such concretion of sensual detail is by virtue of its initial base already a metaphor" [Tuwe].*

4. *See Peter Crisp's abstract.*

5. *It may not be a mere detail that Attridge chooses to abbreviate Life and Times of Michael K as Michael K, while we find ourselves using Life and Times instead.*

6. *See Agamben and Deleuze, Essays Critical and Clinical. See also Badiou, Blanchot, Derrida, Rancière, and Žižek.*

7. *For an overview and critical account of, on occasion, hilarious interpretations of Bartleby, see McCall.*

8. *Deleuze himself refers to many literary works and dealt with authors such as a.o. Leopold von Sacher Masoch, Henry James, Antonin Artaud, T. E. Lawrence, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Alfred Jarry, and, of course, Marcel Proust.*

9. *In Life and Times the medical officer qualifies Michaels (Michael K) as a universal soul [151].*

10. *"The life of such an individuality effaces itself to the benefit of the singular life that is immanent to a man who no longer has a name and yet cannot be confused with anyone else" [Deleuze, "Immanence" 5].*

11. *Deleuze does not go into the specific temporality pertaining to the tale's characters. Nonetheless, we would note that Turkey and Nippers are subjected to a striking daily rhythm: one works hard and strong in the morning but goes into some kind of disruptive overdrive in the afternoon; the other arrives in a bad humor but switches to normal in the afternoon. All of this is communicated to us by the lawyer who measures and determines this modality of time, Chronos. Would not, in this scheme of things, the third copyist, the rebarbative Bartleby, incarnate the pure time of becoming, Aion? Does Bartleby incorporate the limitless quality of future and past, while also being as finite as a moment, in this case the meridian moment that separates the morning from the afternoon?*