

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

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NOTA INTRODUTTIVA

Siamo lieti di inaugurare in questo fascicolo la nuova Rassegna di Tradizione della cultura classica, dedicata alla segnalazione di opere recenti relative al rapporto tra la cultura classica e tardoantica e la cultura moderna e contemporanea. Le schede saranno redatte preferibilmente in inglese, ma saranno accolti i contributi nelle più diffuse lingue europee. Ci si augura che questa Rassegna possa costituire un momento di contatto tra studiosi che, muovendo da specializzazioni diverse, si riconoscono nella tradizione della cultura europea.

I Direttori con Guido Milanese

CHARITY, MELANCHOLY, AND THE PROTESTANT ETHIC IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *BARTLEBY* AND *COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO!*

FEDERICO BELLINI

Relying on Max Weber's and Colin Campbell's description of the Spirit of Capitalism, I plan to interpret the narrators of Melville's *Bartleby* and *Cock-A-Doodle-Do!* as embodying two complementary aspects of the same ethical attitude informing such spirit. This is characterized by the oscillation between sentimentalism and individualism, charity and egoism, idealism and pragmatism, which Melville detected in the everyman of his time. In particular, I will focus on the references to the theological debate on free will and to the theme of melancholy as pivotal elements to comprehend Melville's insight. Finally, I will show how Merry musk and Bartleby, the two other main characters of the stories, may be seen as representing Melville's attempt to question the American society of his time.

Keywords: Herman Melville, *Bartleby*, melancholy, charity, protestant ethic

One fascinating aspect of Melville's short stories is that practically all of them form pairs. In some cases, Melville seems to have been trying to create a contrast between two opposite images in order to make "the light one brighter, the dark one blacker"¹. This is the case of *The Two Temples*, *Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs* and *The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids*. Other pairs, instead, are made up of more autonomous stories, the symmetry of which is less obvious, such as *The Happy Failure* and *The Fiddler*, or Benito Cereno and *The Bell-Tower*. This curious tendency for the creation of parallelisms is a typical feature of Melville's writing style and it can be seen as an intrinsic necessity of his creative process. As Harrison Hayford highlights², in Melville's novels this usually takes the form of a duplication of elements in terms of characters, images, and tones, while within the tighter limits of the short story genre it produces these pairs, which have been variously named by critics "diptychs," "bipartite stories," or "counterstories"³. Whatever the

¹ J. Leyda, *Introduction*, in *The Complete Stories of Herman Melville*, Jay Leyda ed., Eyre & Spottiswoode, London 1951, p. xx.

² See H. Hayford, *Melville's Prisoners*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2003, p. 144.

³ Leyda names the first group of pairs we have mentioned "diptychs" (J. Leyda, *Introduction*, p. xx), and Winter specifies them as "Transatlantic Diptychs" highlighting how, by counterposing an American setting to a British one they can be interpreted as anticipating "transatlantic criticism" (A. Winter, *Seeds of Discontent: The Expanding Satiric Range of Melville's Transatlantic Diptychs*, "Leviathan", 2, 2006, p. 33). Dillingham opts for "bipartite stories" (W.B., Dillingham, *Melville's Short Fiction*, University of Georgia Press, Athens 1977, p. 8),

cause of this phenomenon may be, taking into account these symmetries allows for a more profound appreciation of the richness in meaning found in Melville's short stories.

This also is true in the case of *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, which has its "companion piece"⁴ in *Cock-A-Doodle-Do! Or, The Crowing of the Noble Cock Beneventano*: a parallel reading of these two stories allows for a better interpretation of both, despite the fact that the latter is a much lesser-known and definitely less artistically accomplished work. The two stories were probably written within the same time frame, and the latter was published in *Harper's Magazine* in December 1853, the same month in which *Putnam's Monthly* featured the second and last part of *Bartleby*⁵. Many parallelisms between the two stories urge a joint analysis, starting from the obvious similarities in the relationship of the two pairs of characters. In both cases, we have two persons belonging to different social classes who interact according to a similar pattern: an active character desires something from the other, who frustrates his desires by opposing a stubborn, passive resistance. In both stories this behavior leads to a climax that culminates with the death of the passive character. The similarity is further reflected in the narrative form: in both cases, it is a first-person narration, with an internal focalization centered on the first of the two characters. The tone of the narration is also similar, as both narrators are self-indulgent and unreliable in the way they present themselves and show interest in the other character while at the same time proving unable to comprehend him.

Such correspondences prove that the two tales are rooted in the same creative soil and call for a joint reading in order to disentangle the complexities of their meaning. In this paper, I intend to show how the two narrators embody two complementary aspects of the same ethical attitude characterized by the oscillation between sentimentalism and individualism, charity and egoism, melancholy and self-reliance. On the one hand, such oscillation corresponds to the tension between the Weberian Protestant ethics and its hedonistic counterpart described in Colin Campbell's seminal book *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. On the other, in Melville's intention, it mirrors the ethical stance of what he considered the everyman of his time, against whom he was taking a conflictual stance. Campbell's work will also allow for a fresh interpretation of the crucial reference to Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Priestley in *Bartleby*. I will finally show how the other two characters of the stories, Merrymusk and Bartleby, represent Melville's attempt to come to terms with the society of his time and how their tragic death expresses his feelings of frustration towards it.

One of the most prominent features of the narrator and main character of *Cock-A-Doodle-Do!* – and one that has not yet received enough critical attention – is the way he is represented as a stereotypically melancholy subject, heavy with dark humors, worried

thus giving prominence to the diegetic connection between the two over their symmetry. The same Dillingham names those less obviously paired stories such as *The Happy Failure* and *The Fiddler* "counterstories".

⁴ S.P. Moss, *Cock-A-Doodle-Do and Some Legends in Melville Scholarship*, "American Literature", 40, 1968, 2, p. 210.

⁵ M. Fisher, *Going Under: Melville's Short Fiction and the American 1850*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge 1977, p. 163.

by gloomy thoughts, irritable and self-pitying. He declares that he is “too full of hypoes to sleep”⁶ and tries to find comfort in a walk through the morning haze, reminding one of Ishmael⁷, who decides to embark on the *Pequod* in order to “driv[e] off the spleen” and get free of his “hypoes.”⁸ While trudging up a steep hill he hyperbolically remarks that his head is so bent earthward that it looks like he is “butting it against the world”⁹, a legacy of the traditional iconographical “motif of the drooping head” of Melancholy which “combine[s] in an almost unique fashion the triad of grief, fatigue and meditation”¹⁰. The landscape itself seems to chime with his sluggish mood: the nearby river is “lagging, fever-and-agueish,” and the condensed smoke of the chimneys hovers over the village “like a pall”¹¹. He indulges in grim and depressing thoughts about the recently failed revolutionary attempts against despotism, about the disastrous products of modernity, and most of all about his creditor, the “horrid man”¹² who is hounding him for the money that he owes him.

This last detail, in addition to clarifying the grotesque dimension of the character’s melancholy, also introduces another important aspect regarding his social class. The narrator belongs to the landed rural gentry, the same class that the protagonist of *Pierre* belonged to, whose former wealth was at that time being eroded by urban financial capitalism. The character proves to be conscious of the economic circumstances of his situation as despite the conventional wisdom that “money was never so plentiful – a drug in the market,” he laments that he cannot get “any of the drug, though there never was a sick man more in need of that particular sort of medicine”¹³. In the United States, this class played a role analogous to that played in Europe by the old aristocracy, being rapidly overcome by the rise of the new mercantile bourgeoisie but still clinging to a lifestyle it often could no longer afford. The character’s attire – “lean, double-breasted dress-coat,” “long-skirted” over-coat, and “crab-stick”¹⁴ –, at the time old-fashioned and pretentious, further confirms his social identity and tastes. This also explains the character’s pessimistic view of modernity, expressed

⁶ H. Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839-1860*, H. Hayford – A.A. MacDougall – G. Th. Tanselle ed., Northwestern University Press, Evanston and Chicago 1987, p. 268. In what follows *PT*.

⁷ J. Porte, *In Respect to Egotism. Studies in American Romantic Writing*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, p. 190.

⁸ H. Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, H. Hayford – H. Parker – G. Thomas Tanselle ed., Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, Evanston 1988, p. 3. The motif of the melancholy character hitting the road to attempt to get rid of his melancholy is a recurrent one throughout Melville’s oeuvre. It is represented at least by Toby in *Typee*, Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, the narrator of *Cock-A-Dooodle-Do!*, and Clarel. See my *Herman Melville’s Typee: A Melancholy Look at Civilization and its Other*, in “Amerikastudien/American Studies” 62, 2017, 1 (forthcoming) and “Driving off the Spleen”: *Moby-Dick and Healing from Melancholy Reverie*, in “Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies”, 2017 (forthcoming).

⁹ *PT*, p. 268.

¹⁰ R. Klibansky – E. Panofsky – F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*, Krauss Reprint, Nedeln 1979, p. 286.

¹¹ *PT*, p. 269.

¹² *PT*, p. 270.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *PT*, p. 269.

in his loathing for what he sarcastically calls the “great improvements of the age,” referring in particular to the spread of the railway as “a facilitator of death and murder”¹⁵.

In line with the deeply rooted stereotypes of the time, the melancholy attitude of the character, his social class, and his contempt of modernity are essentially intertwined. As shown by Branka Arsic, in nineteenth-century America, melancholy was considered an essentially anti-American feeling, a trait typical of those, like the decadent landed gentry, who were overly influenced by the Old Continent. The American nationalists defined themselves by contrast as optimistic, progressive, democratic, and independent from European habits and tastes. Arsic quotes a passage from Benjamin Rush’s *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the Diseases of the Mind* (1812), in which the physician and founding father of the United States claimed that melancholy was destined to disappear from America once the bonds with Europe had been cut by the Revolution. The last melancholy people on American soil, he claimed, would be “friends of Great Britain [...] timid Americans, who took no public part of the war”¹⁶.

The narrator of *Cock-A-Doodle-Do!* proves his connection to European culture in an ironic reference to one of the seminal texts for the definition of the British Romantic melancholy character¹⁷. After he has heard the elated crowing of the rooster, which for a moment dispels his melancholy, the character begins to fear that it might lose its beauty with the passing of time. He then expresses his concern by means of an adapted quotation from Wordsworth’s *Resolution and Independence*.

Of fine mornings,
We fine lusty cocks begin our crows in gladness;
but when eve comes we don’t crow quite so much,
for then comes despondency and madness.¹⁸

This ironic quotation serves the purpose of further characterizing the narrator as influenced by European Romanticism, while at the same time inviting the reader to appreciate how the first part of this story can be read as a parody of *Resolution and Independence*. In this case, though, the situation is reversed: in the poem, there was a happy character in the sunny weather who “from the might / of joys in minds that can no further go” (IV, 1-2) sinks in “dim sadness – and blind thoughts” (IV, 7); here a dejected protagonist becomes

¹⁵ *PT*, p. 270.

¹⁶ B. Arsic, *Passive Constitutions, Or 7 ½ Times Bartleby*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2007, p. 47.

¹⁷ See M. Fisher, *Going Under*, p. 165. It is probably worth noting that Coleridge’s *Dejection: an Ode*, was in part written as a response to Wordsworth’s poem (See S. Maxfield Parrish, *Coleridge’s Dejection*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1988). A fascinating reading of *Cock-A-Doodle-Do!* in relation to Leopardi’s *Cantico del Gallo Silvestre* is D. Bonanno, *A Chartless Voyage: Presenze leopardiane nell’opera di Herman Melville*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2006.

¹⁸ *PT*, p. 272. The original verses of Wordsworth’s poem, inspired by Thomas Chatterton’s death, are: “We poets in our youth begin in gladness; / but thereof comes in the end despondency and madness” (VII, 5-7).

joyful and enthusiastic in an equally off-handed manner¹⁹. The parody of Wordsworth and his sentimental view of nature is continued in the grotesque scene in which the character, enthusiastically wound up by the crowing of the rooster, addresses some calves as “friends”²⁰, inviting them to take part in his happiness.

After the narrator has heard the exhilarating crow, however, his emotional state changes radically. From being a melancholy and sentimentalist subject, influenced by European Romanticism, he turns into the ideal optimistic new American and defines himself, with a telling reference to Emerson’s key-word, “in pure overflow of self-reliance and a sense of universal security”²¹. If he had previously expressed great concern about the spread of the railway, an “iron fiend” causing death and murder, now he greets the train as a “vein of silver” carrying “gay passengers”²² to the city. Accordingly, the dark smoke that hovered over the village “like a pall” now suddenly looks like “the azure tester over a bridal bed”²³.

The abrupt change in the sentiments and attitude of the character highlights the psychological instability of the melancholy subject, but it also has a more profound meaning. As proven by Johannes Bergmann, *Cock-A-Doodle-Do!* was inspired by a peculiar fashion of the time, a real “craze [...] for fancy chickens – the ‘hen fever’ as it was called”²⁴. Such fashion, which exploded and quickly vanished in New England in the early 1850s, led many people to invest significant amounts of money in purebred chickens, which were appreciated more for their crows and plumage than for their culinary properties, and which became genuine status symbols. In the wake of this phenomenon, an impressive amount of specialized literature was published, and many novelists were inspired by it. Among these, Bergmann points to “Melville’s New York acquaintance Cornelius Mathews [who] published *Chanticleer: A Thanksgiving Story of the Peabody Family*”²⁵ only three years before the publication of *Cock-A-Doodle-Do*. Mathews was one of the leaders of the Young America, a movement to which Melville himself had been close to but from which he lat-

¹⁹ The ironic dialogue undertaken with Wordsworth’s poem continues with the upturning of its central image, that of the old leech-gatherer who is admired by the poet for his stoic attitude. In *Cock-A-Doodle-Do!*, the narrator meets a farmer who is striving unsuccessfully to fix a “tumble-down old rail-fence,” (*PT*, 276) but, instead of admiring his determination, he despises him concluding with a radically anti-Wordsworthian stance: “one of the causes of the sad fact why idiocy more prevails among farmers than any other class of people, is owing to their undertaking the mending of rotten rail-fences” (*Ibidem*). Also, the image of the “dripping mist” hovering over the brook recalls a similar image in *Resolution and Independence*: “on the moors / the hare is running races in her mirth; / and with her feet she from the plashy earth / raises a mist; which, glittering in the sun, / runs with her all the way, wherever she doth run”.

²⁰ *PT*, p. 20.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 279. This dialectics is described from a different angle in Giuseppe Nori’s introduction to his translation of *Bartleby* (G. Nori, *Introduction*, in H. Melville, *Bartleby*, Portaparole, Roma 2009).

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

²⁴ J.D. Bergmann, *Melville’s Tales*, in *A Companion to Melville Studies*, J. John Bryant Ed., Greenwood Press, New York 1986, pp. 255.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

er distanced himself²⁶. One of the goals of this nationalistic association was to promote autonomy from Europe in all fields, an effort which, as far as literature was concerned, meant promoting genuinely American themes, of which “fancy hens” could very well be an example. Mathews was one of the most fervid proponents of these ideas, “expressing his nationalistic ideas with an unmatched shrillness that brought contempt from many rival literati”²⁷. Years before writing *Chanticleer*, he had already declared he intended to write books which “however rude [would be] full of all the elements of thought truly born and nurtured by the country in which I live”²⁸. It is then reasonable to interpret *Cock-A-Doodle-Do!* as a parody of Mathews’ novel and, more broadly, of the Young America attempt to forcefully endow literature with supposedly authentic American themes, thus subordinating art to propaganda.

The oscillation between, on the one hand, melancholy, pessimism, sentimentalism, and the European romantic legacy and, on the other, nationalism, self-reliance, optimism, and exaltation of progress, defines the contradictory psychology of the character. On a symbolic level, though, this oscillation embodies the social changes taking place at that time in rural New England: on the one hand the nationalistic modernization put forward by the Young America movement and influenced by an updated version of the yeoman ideal; on the other the landed gentry, which was economically succumbing but still socially influential.

Once the symbolic role of the narrator of *Cock-A-Doodle-Do!* has been identified, it is easy to show how relevant it is in relation to the narrator of *Bartleby*. In spite of their apparently different surfaces in fact – a hot-blooded indebted man living in the country and a rather well-off and very quiet Wall Street attorney – they are essentially similar. First, both characters are bachelors displaying a pronounced emotional instability that, despite being more marked in the case of the landowner – who oscillates between the cosmic pessimism of the first few paragraphs and optimistic enthusiasm –, is no less present in the Manhattan lawyer. Already on the first page, right after having claimed to be a calm and quiet person,

²⁶ Melville’s relations with the Young America movement is a complicated issue, which has found a balanced analysis in E.L. Widmer, *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, pp. 112 and ff. The author of the essay presents Melville’s early fascination and later discomfort for the movement’s ideas about “literature as a social instrument” (100) and America’s “Manifest Destiny in literature” (103). While “[t]he Young American campaign for national literature expected nothing greater than the comic, mock-Dickensian novels that flowed from the pen of Mathews, a realism rooted in tiny jokes of no significance” (119). Melville’s meditation on the present and future of America was of a much more ambiguous and problematic kind. See also R.S. Levine, *Melville and Americanness: A Problem*, in “Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies”, 16, 2014, 3, pp. 5-20; J. Stafford, *The Literary Criticism of “Young America”: A Study in the Relationship of Politics and Literature 1837-1850*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1952 and G. Nori, *Il Seme delle Piramidi. Evoluzione artistica e intellettuale di Herman Melville*, AndreaLivi Editore, Fermo 1995.

²⁷ E.L. Widmer, *Young America*, p. 98. “In a manuscript summary of his life Cornelius Mathews put forward as one of his claims to distinction that he was the ‘originator of the Young America party in the United States’. Though he was never modest or quiet in his appraisal of himself or his achievements, Mathews was probably not exaggerating, this time. At any rate he was known as the ‘Corypheus of Young America’, the ‘Centurion of the sect’”. J. Stafford, *The Literary Criticism of “Young America”*, p. 21.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

the narrator bursts out in a rage against “the sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Master in Chancery, by the new Constitution”²⁹ that has taken away from him the opportunity of an easy income. Such instability emerges again later in his relationship with his new employee, Bartleby, which fluctuates between the desire to be charitable and sudden outbursts of irritation.

The lawyer’s emotional transformation follows a movement equal and opposite to that experienced by the narrator of *Cock-A-Doodle-Do*, and it is equally ironically exaggerated so as to express the author’s scorn for what these characters represent. While in the latter case the narrator turns from despondency into optimistic enthusiasm, in the former the lawyer starts out as a serene and self-satisfied character and gradually sinks into melancholy. In *Cock-A-Doodle-Do* the change was produced by the crow of the rooster, in *Bartleby* the transformation is triggered by the encounter with Bartleby. After the narrator has discovered how extremely desolate and lonely the life of his clerk is, he is suddenly seized by a “feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy” and is forced to realize how “misery hides aloof”³⁰ behind the veil of happiness. The clinical picture of melancholy is completed by his plunging into “sad fancies” and “chimeras” that he attributes to a “sick and silly brain”³¹.

Also in *Bartleby*, as in *Cock-A-Doodle-Do!*, melancholy is represented as connected to a feeling of sentimental brotherhood and charity. The land-owner, while reading Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, feels sympathetic towards his employee who is eating out in the cold and offers him a hot meal³², while the lawyer is drawn “irresistibly to gloom” by the “bond of common humanity”³³. The former boasts about having bought medicine for a sick child and having given up his berth to a sick lady during a sea trip, even though he then complains about the rheumatism that ensued³⁴. In *Bartleby*, the lawyer that had declared to “seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages”³⁵, charitably decides not to fire Bartleby and to “humor him in his strange willfulness”³⁶. The bitter irony which permeates these passages expresses Melville’s deep-seated disillusionment about the way charity was promoted and shown off among some sectors of society at the time, a disillusionment which finds its bleakest representation in *Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs*.

What is relevant in this context is that the charity fostered by the lawyer is not represented as a disinterested and spontaneous feeling. By contrast, it is based on a purely intellectual sense of human brotherhood, and it is not rooted in genuine sympathy. Charity is a way to feed one’s own moral narcissism and to obtain, as the narrator puts it, “a delicious

²⁹ *PT*, p. 14.

³⁰ *PT*, p. 28.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² Melville’s melancholy characters are also often identified with fancy and daydreaming, in this case expressed by the lawyer’s pensive attitude and by the discrepancy between the models he chooses – Byron, Cicero, John Jacob Astor, all of them expressing initiative and passion – and his quiet life.

³³ *PT*, p. 28.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

self-approval”³⁷ and “a sweet morsel of [one’s] conscience”³⁸. The “fraternal melancholy”³⁹ is thus presented as a hypocritical and unstable feeling, as proven by the fact that it is abandoned as soon as the lawyer understands that nothing can be done to save Bartleby.

The “pure melancholy and sincerest pity” gradually decline as he concludes that Bartleby is the “victim of innate and incurable disorder,” so that “that same melancholy merge[s] into fear, that pity into repulsion.” He reasons that since pity is a painful feeling, when “it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succour, common sense bids the soul rid of it”⁴⁰. Pragmatism wins over the “fraternal melancholy,” and the uselessness of any intervention justifies the interruption of charity and dissipates melancholy. Bartleby can merely serve as an occasion for proving one’s good conscience, but only in so far as it does not entail too much effort.

Though it may seem morally questionable, the lawyer’s line of thought is perfectly legitimate once considered within the framework of the protestant ethics famously described by Max Weber. According to Weber, in the Protestant worldview – from its origins but most strongly during the nineteenth century – the belief in predestination notably entails a certain form of pragmatism. Charity cannot be, as it would be for the Catholic, a means to guarantee a seat in Heaven or a way to make this world better; it is merely the exterior mark of one’s own fortune. Good works and charity are thus considered to be useless “as a means of attaining salvation,” even though they contribute to “getting rid of the fear of damnation,” being seen as an “indispensable sign of election”⁴¹.

As such, if nothing can be done for Bartleby, given that his destiny is already written, to pitying him is a mistake. The lawyer is brought to fully realize this only when he “at leisure intervals [looks] a little into Edwards on the Will, and Priestley on Necessity”⁴². These books induce in the narrator “a salutary feeling,” as he slides “into the persuasion that these troubles [...] had been all predestinated from eternity, and Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence”⁴³.

Many critics – including Emery, McCall, Patrick, and Arsic⁴⁴ – have argued that the reference to Joseph Priestley and Jonathan Edwards plays a crucial role in the story. It seems to me, though, that critics have not yet fully appreciated the reasons why precisely these eminent theologians – and not others holding similar views on the question of free will – are cited, and what purpose they serve in characterizing the narrator through a specific

³⁷ *PT*, p. 23.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴¹ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Routledge, London 2001, p. 69.

⁴² *PT*, p. 37.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ A.M. Emery, *The Alternatives of Melville’s Bartleby*, in “Nineteenth-Century Fiction”, 31, 1976, 2, pp. 170-187; D. McCall, *The Silence of Bartleby*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1989; W.R. Patrick, *Melville’s Bartleby and the Doctrine of Necessity*; B. Arsic, *Passive Constitutions, Or 7 ½ Times Bartleby*. See also P. Ludovici, *Etymologies: “The Lightning-Rod Man” e “Bartleby”*, in P. Cabibbo (ed.), *Melvilliana*, Bulzoni, Roma 1983, pp. 179-80.

religious type and the ethos connected to it. The work by Jonathan Edwards referred to here is *The Freedom of the Will* (1754), which was written in order to, in his words, “crush”⁴⁵ the Arminian doctrines, guilty of re-affirming free will within Protestantism. In line with many other thinkers of the time, Edwards believes that the idea of free will comes from a fallacious distinction between the will and its motives. One does not want something because one prefers it to something else, but rather preference and will are one and the same. Will is thus defined as “the power, opportunity, or advantage, that any one has to do as he pleases, or conducting in any respect, according to his pleasure”⁴⁶. In an almost paradoxical way, then, according to Edwards man is free to do what he cannot avoid doing, as his will is entirely part of a causal chain: a person certainly can have the impression of being free, but he cannot behave differently than he does. The work by Priestley that is alluded to in the text is probably *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated*, an annex to his *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (1777) which holds similar views to Edwards’: the theologian defends the theory that negates free will, claiming this to be nothing else than a fallacious semblance. As I will show next, though, the ethical implications that these thinkers draw from their doctrines do not fit completely within Weber’s description, and this difference will be essential in the interpretation of the two stories.

The narrator of *Bartleby* is then a follower of these doctrines, and by “looking a little” into these essays he recalls that men have all been predestinated since eternity, that the whole universe is nothing but a predetermined machine, and he accordingly feels legitimized in interrupting his charity towards Bartleby. The same belief is expressed by the narrator of *Cock-A-Dooodle-Do!*, when he realizes how futile it is to complain about misfortunes, since “heavens themselves ordain these things – else they would not happen”⁴⁷. Both narrators thus show, on the one hand, the same tendency to melancholy leading to sentimental brotherhood and, on the other, the same cold belief in theological determinism leading to pragmatic individualism. The oscillation between these two apparently contradictory aspects, reproducing the oscillation between optimism and pessimism diagnosed in the first story, might at first sight seem arbitrary. However, a more probing analysis shows that this apparent contradiction corresponds to Melville’s intuition of an essential affinity between the two attitudes they represent.

In order to prove this I will refer to Colin Campbell’s seminal book *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, in which the author corrects the Weberian analysis we have previously recalled, showing how the Protestant ethic was not actually as monolithic as Weber claimed it to be. On the contrary, it was always traversed by a radical contradiction between the main and most typically Weberian trend characterized by industriousness and frugality, and another trend – which Campbell names, perhaps infelicitously, the “Romantic ethic” – characterized by hedonism and prodigality. The former, rooted in the more orthodox Calvinist belief in predestination, restrained sentimental empathy and charity by deeming them useless for salvation, and promoted a way of life that

⁴⁵ J. Edwards, *Representative Selections*, American Book Company, New York 1935, p. xli.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xlix.

⁴⁷ *PT*, p. 270.

“subsequently evolved into Rationalism and Utilitarianism”⁴⁸. The latter was grounded on alternative trends of the Protestant theology – represented by Arminianism, Cambridge Platonism, and Leibniz’s theodicy – which defended free will and advocated for the necessity of good works and charity for salvation. By promoting “charitable feelings of pity and sympathy”, this school of thought created “a new religious ethic of benevolence”⁴⁹ which later “developed into Sentimentalism and Romanticism”⁵⁰. By legitimizing and even encouraging the expression of feelings and desires this ethical stance indirectly promoted “a longing to experience in reality those pleasures created and enjoyed in imagination,”⁵¹ and thus contributed to the rise of fashion and modern consumerism.

While the Weberian “Protestant ethic” based on the values of work, discipline, thrift, and individualism contributed to the growth of production and capital accumulation, the “romantic” (in Campbell’s sense of the term) ethic of sentimentalism resulted in the growth of charity and social utopianism as well as consumption and hedonism. Campbell’s description of the strain between the two ethical trends excellently sketches the ambiguities of nineteenth-century American society in which both these forces were at work in shaping modern capitalism. Production and consumption, discipline and leisure, individualism and solidarity do not oppose each other as alternatives, but rather define the spectrum of modern ethos. “More crucial than either – claims Campbell – is the tension generated between them, for it is upon this that the dynamism of the West ultimately depends”⁵². Modern individuals do not inhabit only “the iron cage of economic necessity,” but at the same time “a castle of romantic dreams,”⁵³ and the strife to turn the former into the latter express the essence and the contradictions of modern sensitivity.

As Campbell shows, melancholy plays a pivotal role in this context, as it is one of the aspects in which these apparently contradictory trends converge, thus confirming their essential kinship. On the one hand, “romantic” hedonism is paired with an almost morbid appreciation of depression which proceeds directly from seventeenth-century sentimentalism. For the Romantics “an aching sense of pleasure lost was likely to be the defining experience”⁵⁴ and “disillusionment, melancholy, and an intense longing for the perfect pleasure that will not die”⁵⁵ accordingly became part and parcel of the romantic subjectivity. On the other hand, a tendency that considered melancholy as a meaningful aspect of religious experience also develops within the Weberian trend: “Periodic descents into the Slough of Despond,” Campbell claims, were not only the natural accompaniments of “a creed uncompromisingly pessimistic and frightening as Calvinism; they were also some-

⁴⁸ C. Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, Blackwell, Oxford 1979, p. 219.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁵³ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem.*

thing which the devout Calvinist was advised to experience". As a consequence, manifestations of melancholia, dejection, brooding were "widely greeted with approval"⁵⁶.

Melville proves his excellent ability in sensing the cultural dynamics of his time by creating in the narrators of *Bartleby* and *Cock-A-Dooodle-Do!* two emblems that combine the two different yet complementary systems of values of his time: the Protestant one and the "Romantic" one. If the first aspect, Romantic dejection conjoined with hedonist egotism, can well describe the narrator of *Cock-A-Dooodle-Do!*, the second, a periodically complacent melancholia as a bitter-sweet morsel for one's consciousness, is closer to the narrator of *Bartleby*. Melville does not limit himself to representing the two ethics as alternatives, but through the oscillations in their behavior points out how they are essentially entangled.

The emotional instability of the narrator of *Cock-A-Dooodle-Do!*, ranging from dejection and self-pity to self-confident enthusiasm, represents the ongoing cultural transformation in the American countryside of the time. On the one hand he embodies sentimentalist romanticism, promoting idealistic and charitable behavior, suspicion towards modernity, and at the same time both prodigality – as testified by the narrator's willingness to squander his money to maintain his lifestyle – and fashion – embodied by the craze for fancy chickens. On the other hand, after the crow of the rooster he embodies the active, self-confident, independent, and proud optimism of the transcendentalists and of the Young America movement, fostering modernization and nationalism. In turn, the narrator of *Bartleby* embodies the same cultural transformation in an urban setting. On the one hand, he represents the affirmation of a new social class of bureaucrats tending to their "snug businesses" and in a way incarnating in their monotonous and uncreative work the sense that everything could be regulated by a determinist law; on the other, after meeting Bartleby, he represents the affirmation of sentimentalism and charitable melancholy as forms of escapism from the monotony of the world. Both are pivotal elements of the spirit of the time, as they constitute the two poles of the ethical spectrum which were typical of the age of early capitalism.⁵⁷

It is now possible to understand why the narrator of *Bartleby* decides to quote precisely Edwards and Priestley as representative critics of free will, rather than other stricter Calvinist thinkers. These two authors uniquely represent precisely a point of contact between the two ethics presented by Campbell, because even though they are both part of the tradition referred to by Weber, they are at the same time peculiarly compatible with the alternative "Romantic" trend. Edwards' determinism, in spite of his famous appeal to sinners to be aware of their being at the mercy of an "angry God," is indeed far from the stereotypical Calvinist gloom. On the contrary, as Campbell himself claims, it represents a "brand of

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁵⁷ Giuseppe Nori has shown the relevance of Melville's reaction to sentimentalism and historicism as part of the Nationalist *Zeitgeist* of the time. ("Da "Bartleby" a *The Confidence-Man*, Melville riscrive dunque gli annali della compassione aggravando le miserie dei suoi afflitti con le problematiche irrisolvibili della storia. Egli usa il sentimentalismo e la critica del sentimentalismo per svelare l'inadeguatezza e la complicità dei processi psicologici, cognitivi, e conativi (immedesimazione, comprensione, e prassi) basati sul sentimento stesso. In tal modo egli mette in questione l'ideologia nazionale, da sempre dedita, tramite la retorica del consenso, al contenimento dei divari e alla ricomposizione dei conflitti." G. Nori, *Il Seme delle Piramidi*, p. 83).

cosmic optimism” which, “influenced as it was by the Cambridge Platonists, laid the basis for the later Transcendentalist movement in New England”⁵⁸. The same holds true for Priestley, who went so far as to launch a frontal attack against Calvinism, defined by him as a “a most gloomy system”⁵⁹ precisely because of the excessive pessimism it entailed. He criticized Calvinism for deriving predestination from original sin instead of connecting it to the divine design, according to which “all seeming *discord* is real *harmony*, and all apparent *evil*, ultimate *good*”⁶⁰. While the God of Calvin is an avenger dooming the majority of mankind to everlasting punishment without appeal, Priestley’s God is “a benevolent God using evil and suffering as a means for effecting the greater good of all mankind”⁶¹.

It was thanks to thinkers like Edwards and Priestley that Puritanism could make the transition to “Romantic religion, this being as much a logical development out of the Reformation – as much a descendant of Protestant ethics – as Franklin’s spirit”⁶². Melville picked the two authors very carefully, relying on the fact that his readers would grasp the reference and understand the human type that he wanted to represent. And this type, as shown by the fact that both protagonists are unnamed, was the everyman of their time, whose ethic was at the same time Protestant and “Romantic”, stretched between industriousness and hedonism, individualism and sympathy, self-reliance and nihilism.

If the interpretation of the narrators as embodying the ethical dynamics of the time holds true, I can now turn to the other two main characters, namely, Merrymusk and Bartleby. Once again, despite the apparent differences between the two – a hard-working and staunch lumberjack and a passively resistant clerk who refuses to work –, they have much in common. First and foremost, they both refuse to comply with their employers’ requests: Merrymusk refuses to sell his rooster despite the attractive offer of \$500 made by the land-owner, and Bartleby merely ‘prefers not to’. Their refusals, apparently irrational, baffle the narrators and trigger their emotional instability. Both characters, moreover, play the role of complementary opposites, or doubles, of the respective narrator. While the land-owner proves at the same time lazy and enthusiastic, self-pitying and optimistic, Merrymusk is hard-working and, despite knowing that his family has no hope, bears his fate with courage. While the lawyer embodies inconsistency and self-indulgent charitable sentimentalism, Bartleby shows a resigned though firm attitude and an apparently radical lack of emotions.

The two characters thus represent an alternative, a way to counteract the ethical stance of the other two and therefore give shape, as Winter puts it, to Melville’s “ever sharpening critique of American social and political values”⁶³. While the two narrators embody the modern everyman, however, Merrymusk and Bartleby – who are given, not by chance

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁵⁹ W.R. Patrick, *Melville’s Bartleby and the Doctrine of Necessity*, in *Bartleby the Inscrutable. A collection of Commentary on Herman Melville’s Tale Bartleby the Scrivener*, Th. M. Inge ed., Archon Books, Hamden 1979, p. 150.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁶² C. Campbell, *The Romantic*, p. 220.

⁶³ A. Winter, *Seeds of Discontent*, p. 17. See also P. Cabibbo – P. Ludovici, “Bartleby”: *la struttura semantica della doppia negazione*, in P. Cabibbo (ed.), *Melvilliana*, Bulzoni, Roma 1983, pp. 43-60.

and unlike the narrators, a personal name – are individuals, exceptions, whose attempts to face the system are doomed to fail. There is, though, an evident difference between the two characters that has to be accounted for: while the former is characterized as a devoted and hard-working man, the latter hardly does anything else besides refusing to work. To be more precise, at first Bartleby works with dedication and, like the lumberjack, in an almost robotic fashion, does “an extraordinary quantity of writing [...] silently, palely, mechanically”⁶⁴. But then something gradually breaks, and his alacrity withers until he permanently gives up. In the context of the parallel reading of *Bartleby* and *Cock-A-Doodle-Do* such different behavior can only be attributed to one cause: Bartleby does not own a fantastic rooster to inspire him. That is, Bartleby has no special possession, he has no great ideal, nothing to be faithful to, and cannot find a source of energy to keep the machine going. Bartleby and Merrymusk represent two opposite or alternative reactions to the same situation: that of facing a system which does not leave any possibility of escape. On the one hand, there is stoic resistance in the name of something valuable, on the other resignation and passivity.

The alternative between Merrymusk and Bartleby did not represent for Melville, at this point of his career, a matter of purely psychological or philosophical conjecture. On the contrary, it is evident, and has become somewhat of a critical commonplace, that Melville was giving expression, more or less consciously, to his own situation. Merrymusk’s blind and stoic industriousness has probably much to do with the way Melville was looking at his own work at the time of writing this short story. This can be appreciated in the light of two letters that Melville wrote not long before. He talks about how he had written *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* as mere commercial products, in order to recover from the flop of his previous books. In the first of these letters he bitterly says: “no reputation that is gratifying to me can possibly be achieved by either of these books. They are two *jobs*, which I have done for money – being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood”⁶⁵. One year later he uses the same simile with a different interlocutor: “these books of mine [I wrote] almost entirely for lucre – by the job, as a wood sawyer saws wood”⁶⁶. This was certainly a common way of speaking, but it fully accounts for explaining Melville’s choice for Merrymusk’s job: sawing represents the mechanic work that a person does without thinking, because one must, but without investing his real feelings into it. While “sawing the wood” of his more commercial books, Melville’s mind was fixed on what he would have preferred to write, and was hoping for an opportunity to do it again. The fear that this might never happen, together with his difficult economic and personal situation at the time, made the author wonder whether it would be better to just give up writing completely. Bartleby embodies the author’s temptation to just give up and put up with his lot, which in a way is what he would go on to do a few years afterwards, by ceasing to write fiction.

⁶⁴ *PT*, pp. 19-20.

⁶⁵ H. Melville, *The Letters of Herman Melville*, R.D. Merrill – R. Davis – W.H. Gilman eds., Yale University Press, New Haven 1960, p. 91.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

The tragic endings of both stories in any case express how the author knew that no real alternative was accessible, while trying to give shape to his discontent for his society and his situation. Having realized that his career as a writer was steadily declining, and feeling rejected by a society that did not seem to want to hear his voice, Melville was overwhelmed by a sense of impotence. In his tales, he was thus giving shape to his feelings and to his own oscillations between alternative ways of facing the situation. Since failure must be, the question can only be, in Samuel Beckett's words, how to "fail better."

Failure was indeed a theme that was very present in Melville's mind in those months, as is testified by another pair of short stories that were written about the same time as *Cock-A-Doodle-Do* and *Bartleby*⁶⁷. They counterbalance the bleak representation of these by offering a less tragic depiction of individual failures that do not end in death and misery. *The Happy Failure*, as its very title suggests, thematizes the ideal of enduring one's destiny lightly; and *The Fiddler*, representing a violin virtuoso who has renounced his stressful career and "crammed once with fame [...] is now hilarious without it. *With* genius and *without* fame, he is happier than a king"⁶⁸. The more positive attitude of these stories gives testimony of how Melville himself was oscillating between different alternatives, but it is clear from the significant literary superiority and philosophical richness of *Cock-A-Doodle-Do!* and *Bartleby* that he did not want to relieve the sense of failure through blitheness and carelessness.

The impossibility of resisting a world that the author "would prefer" not to have to do with is expressed by the miserable death of both Merrymusk and Bartleby. Not only do the two workers fail to save their own lives, but after their death they are again symbolically vanquished by the other character. In the grotesque final scene of *Cock-A-Doodle-Do!*, the narrator copies the crow of the same rooster that Merrymusk had so jealously defended, transforming it into the trumpet call of optimism and self-reliance that drives away his "doleful dumps"⁶⁹. Accordingly, the lawyer, at the end of the story, closes Bartleby's eyes having obtained a "sweet morsel for [his] conscience", and by pronouncing his final affected "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!"⁷⁰ he reaffirms his sentimental paternalism. One last parallelism between the two stories serves to further prove this point. In both cases the narrators refer to biblical quotations in reference to the death of the other. In *Cock-A-Doodle-Do*, the words from Saint Paul's epistle "Oh! Death, where is thy sting? / Oh! Grave, where is thy victory?"⁷¹ are engraved on the gravestone of the Merrymusk family, under the effigy of a crowing cock. In *Bartleby*, the lawyer indirectly states the death of Bartleby with words coming from the Book of Job, by saying that he is "sitting with kings and counselors"⁷². In both cases, despite coming from two very different texts, the quotations cannot but sound

⁶⁷ See *PT*, p. 693.

⁶⁸ *PT*, p. 267.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

⁷² The same passage is in fact used in *Cock-A-Doodle-Do!* in reference to Merrymusk's dying children who "seem children of emperors and kings, disguised." (*PT*, p. 279).

ironic, expressing an all too easy trick to disperse the tragedy relying on pretentious and melodramatic phrases.

Bartleby and *Cock-A-Doodle-Do!* have proven to be mirror images; every detail in the first reappears and is overturned in the other. At the same time, though, they both reflect the social and ethical transformation of mid-nineteenth century America, offering an ironically skewed perspective that catches the contradictions of the time and tries to bring them together. The gaze of the author, along with the reader's, hesitatingly moves between these two alternatives, sensing at the same time a common tragic destiny hovering over both.

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