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Literature as Experiment. The Ontological Commitment of Fiction

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Abstract: In which sense can literature be conceived as an experiment? What type of experiment and experience does literature offer and what type or dimension of reality is at stake in literary investigations? What are the ontological stakes of literature in its construction of another world or a second nature? In this essay, I address these questions in discussion with two authors who explicitly understand literature as experiment, namely Paul Ricoeur and Giorgio Agamben. To get a better sense of these ontological stakes of the experiment of literature, I will first turn to Ricoeur's account. Subsequently, I will offer a critical discussion of how his concept of configuration, a central notion in his theory of narrative, actually limits the sense of the literary experiment and its ontological stakes. This discussion will address the relation between the concepts of potentiality, contingency, and event. Finally, I will turn to Agamben's reading of Herman Melville's famous story *Bartleby, the Scrivener* to offer a different sense of both the ontological stakes of the literary experiment and the relation between these three concepts.

I. LITERATURE CONDUCTING EXPERIMENTS

In §49 of *Critique of Judgment*, Kant famously writes: 'The imagination (as a productive power of cognition) is very powerful in creating, as it were, an

other nature out of the material supplied to it by actual nature.’¹ For the imagination, nature and the experiences it affords are the raw material to be brought into a new form or second nature; and in this sense, the imagination ‘surpasses nature’. Applied to literature, *Dichtkunst*, which Kant assigns the highest rank among the fine arts, this creative power is described in the following terms:

It invigorates the mind by letting it feel its faculty – free, spontaneous, and independent of determination by nature – of regarding and judging nature as phenomenon in the light of aspects which nature of itself does not afford us in experience, either for the senses or the understanding, and of employing it accordingly on behalf of, and as a sort of schema for, the supersensible.²

By the creation of a new world or nature, the literary imagination thus offers new, lively ways of experiencing the world, ways that nature itself cannot provide. In this sense, literature can be considered as a space in which the human mind conducts experiments that create other worlds in order to experience the world in new ways and at other levels than nature itself provides.

The idea that literature offers us fundamentally new perspectives – *An-sichten* – of the world and of ourselves, is not foreign to present-day reflections on the nature of literature. Yet, it does raise the question of what type of experiment and experience literature provides and what type or dimension of reality is at stake in such literary investigations. What is the ontological commitment of literature in its construction of another world or a second nature? In this essay, I want to address this question by, first, discussing how Paul Ricoeur understands the image that literature is a space in which experiments are conducted and, second, providing a critique of parts of this understanding, inspired by the work of Giorgio Agamben.

Both Agamben and Ricoeur use the image of literature as a space of experiments, and they do so out of a similar concern. Agamben introduces this image when distinguishing the type of experiments conducted in the natural sciences from those in literature:

These [literary] experiments do not simply concern the truth or falsity of hypotheses, the occurrence or nonoccurrence of something, as in scientific experiments; rather, they call into question Being itself, before or beyond its determination as true or false. These experiments are without truth, for truth is what is at issue in them.³

Scientific experiments aim to establish the truth of a theory or the existence of some entity, but to this end, the senses of truth and existence based on which experiments take place are already established and presupposed.

For the literary experiment, however, truth and existence themselves are at stake, exactly because – to phrase it in Kant’s vocabulary – literature creates fundamentally new forms of experience of existence that do not depend on the experiences offered by nature.

In a different context, also Ricoeur suggests that literature is a space of experiments. At several occasions, he uses the metaphor of the laboratory: ‘What is more, new genres have appeared, in particular the novel, that have turned literature into an immense laboratory for experiments in which, sooner or later, every received convention has been set aside.’⁴ The transformation of conventions does not only concern the literary form, but also its content and its impact:

The practice of narrative lies in a thought experiment by means of which we try to inhabit worlds foreign to us. . . . But we added that reading also includes a moment of impetus. This is when reading becomes a provocation to be and to act differently. However this impetus is transformed into action only through a decision whereby a person says: Here I stand!⁵

In literary experiments, truth and existence are not presupposed givens. Rather, one’s mode of being and one’s actions are at stake when ‘reading becomes a provocation to be and act differently’.⁶

Remarkably enough, in his continuation of the quote distinguishing scientific from literary experiments, Agamben reaches a similar conclusion to capture what it means that truth and existence are at stake in literature:

Whoever submits himself to these experiments jeopardises not so much the truth of his own statements as the very mode of his existence; he undergoes an anthropological change that is just as decisive in the context of the individual’s natural history as the liberation of the hand by the erect position was for the primate or as was, for the reptile, the transformation of limbs that changed it into a bird.⁷

Not the truth of this or that statement, but the human’s ‘very mode of existence’ is at stake when someone is exposed to literary experiments since they may lead to a genuine metamorphosis of one’s mode of being and one’s mode of life.

Agamben uses the verb ‘to jeopardise’ to characterise the transformation to which the reader is exposed in these experiments. Similarly, Ricoeur describes the relation between the reader and the text in terms of ‘being exposed’: rather than merely imposing their prejudices on a text, readers are exposed to the world of the text and its provocation to be and act differently.⁸ Hence, Agamben and Ricoeur point to the same peril at the heart of the literary experiment affecting our mode of life and our mode of being.⁹ To

get a better sense of the ontological commitment of literary experiments – a commitment that concerns in the first place one’s mode of being but subsequently affects also one’s mode of life – I will first turn to Ricoeur’s account of them. Subsequently, I will offer a critical discussion of how his concept of configuration, a central notion in his theory of narrative, actually tends to impose undesirable limitations on the literary experiment and its ontological commitment. This will be shown especially in relation to the notions of potentiality, contingency, and event. Finally, I will turn to Agamben’s reading of Herman Melville’s famous story *Bartleby, the Scrivener* to offer a different sense of both the ontological stakes of the literary experiment and the relation between these three concepts.

II. THE INVARIANT OF IMAGINARY VARIATIONS

The impact of Kant’s account of the productive imagination on the hermeneutic tradition can hardly be overstated. To understand how Ricoeur uses this human faculty in his theory of literature, let me first recall how for Dilthey, the imagination’s capacity to vary freely on our own experiences, *Erlebnisse*, is a condition of possibility to understand retrospectively, *Verstehen*, and to re-experience forwardly, *Nacherleben*, the psychic life of others:¹⁰

Every lively presentification of a milieu and external situation stimulates a re-experiencing in us, and the imagination can increase or diminish the intensity of the attitudes, powers, feelings, strivings, and thought-tendencies that characterise our own life-nexus in order to re-create the psychic life of any other person. . . . Thus human beings who are determined from within can experience many other kinds of existence through the imagination.¹¹

This quote concerns the possibility of understanding other people. Yet, the characteristic task and operation of the imagination disclosed here extends beyond the realm of intersubjective understanding. In fact, Dilthey offers here a predecessor of what Ricoeur will call *distanciation*. Each psychic life is ‘determined from within’, according to Dilthey: the particularities of our own course of life determine the specific life-nexus of this psychic life. Nevertheless, thanks to the faculty of the imagination, our sense of life and our experiences are not limited to historical determination of one’s own existence. One’s lived experiences are the point of departure for the imagination to create other experiences that allow us to ‘experience many other kinds of existence’. Hence, the imagination extends the realm of experiences beyond the confines of what we can experience immediately. For my analysis in the third section, it is important to emphasise that this work of the imagination does not only offer the possibility of a retrospective understanding, but also that of a forward re-experiencing of other psychic lives, as if we are in the same flux of life that marks the experience.

Although Ricoeur criticises the central role awarded to the psychic life in Dilthey's hermeneutics, there are nevertheless structural similarities with his own description of the literary imagination and the type of referential value awarded to the products of the imagination. For Ricoeur, the point of departure is not the determination by one's own immediate experiences, but rather the basic familiarity with our everyday world. This basic familiarity and the attitude to the world with which it comes equipped are mirrored in language: everyday language refers ostensibly to objects in our everyday world; everyday language entertains a descriptive relation to reality. Yet, although this being-rooted-in a particular everyday situation is everyone's basic point of departure for understanding the world, human understanding is not limited to it. Humans have the capacity to understand reality also at another level.

Within the phenomenological tradition, to which Ricoeur belongs, this 'other level' is known as being-in-the-world, a term introduced by Heidegger in *Being and Time*.¹² While in their everyday dealings with the world, human beings understand the world in terms of the innerworldly beings they encounter and which they can describe in the conceptual and pragmatic language they have at their disposal, the human understanding has a higher potential, namely to understand the human being's very mode of existence, which is being-in-the-world. At this level, for Ricoeur, language is no longer mainly descriptive – since it is no longer focused on describing beings humans find in the world – but language adopts another form that enables the human being to express the temporal constitution of human existence. Although inspired by Heidegger, by emphasising this latter role of language, Ricoeur departs from the Heideggerian enterprise in *Being and Time*: rather than following Heidegger's attempt to immediately access or disclose this mode of being, Ricoeur rethinks Heidegger's proposal in a Kantian-Diltheyan way. He awards an essential role to the mediating work of the imagination to offer an understanding of reality at the level of Heidegger's being-in-the-world. It is the poetic imagination that invents the (partial) disclosure of this reality.

Yet, one could immediately object: why do we need this addition to Heidegger? If there is an immediate way of understanding being-in-the-world, why would one take the detour of symbols, metaphors and literature, however aesthetically pleasing they may be? For Ricoeur, however, no *immediate* way of disclosing the objectives of Heidegger's phenomenology exists.¹³ This is a basic gesture inspiring his hermeneutical work, starting with his reflections on the indispensability of symbols in the 1960s. Of certain phenomena such as that of evil, he claims, we cannot have a direct experience or understanding.¹⁴ Our understanding of them is necessarily mediated by symbols that announce and disclose these phenomena to us. It is important to see the basic Kantian heritage at this point: the work of the imagination consists in offering new perspectives and new experiences that our everyday existence *cannot* offer

by itself. Hence, the imagination's linguistic creations constitute modes of experiencing phenomena that are not *given* in everyday experience, but that nevertheless concern our reality. These phenomena are only offered in the form of their presentation by the imagination.

In line with Kant's conception of the aesthetic idea, Ricoeur will argue that this presentation is itself not conceptual or of the order of understanding, but is rather a *provocation* and a *demand* to think. The imagination, as he writes in a comment on Kant's aesthetic idea, presents an Idea 'to which no concept is equal', and which therefore 'forces conceptual thought to *think more*'; he adds: 'Creative imagination is nothing other than this *demand* put to conceptual thought.'¹⁵ Hence, when we say that it is by the literary presentation alone that certain phenomena are given to the understanding, we mean to say that the understanding is provoked to think and interpret them, but at the same time is incapable of fully appropriating them.

The question of how the products of the imagination offer us a mediated (and partial) understanding of the basic level of human existence and of the world, is a fundamental question for Ricoeur's oeuvre as a whole and can be addressed in different directions.¹⁶ For the particular purposes of my argument, I will only focus on the specific ontological dimension related to his turn to the literary text and which can be accounted for in terms of *distan- ciation*.¹⁷ According to Dilthey, the imagination suspends the determining nature of the immediate experiences that constitute the psychic life in order to open up our understanding to all kinds of other existences. Analogously, Ricoeur's literary imagination is the productive suspension or *distan- ciation* of the everyday world – 'the abolition of a first-order reference, an abolition effected by fiction and poetry',¹⁸ as he writes – that allows for the production of another type of reference, namely that of the human being's mode of being. Yet, it reaches this dimension of reality only in a *mimetic* form, in the form of an aesthetic idea that presents it as an image without offering an adequate concept for it. Ricoeur therefore writes that the literary text discloses a world of its own, a purely imaginative world, which nevertheless is *an imaginative world I could inhabit*. Since I could inhabit it, this imaginative world does present us with an image of what it means to be in a world. The task of interpretation is subsequently located at the threshold of literature and the conceptual determination of what the aesthetic idea demands us to think.

This turning of phenomenology's attention from what appears or is immediately given to us towards literature's disclosure of a possible world shows the difference in object that phenomenology and poetics aim at: 'Fiction and poetry intend being, not under the modality of being-given, but under the modality of power-to-be [*pouvoir-être*].'¹⁹ In this quote, *pouvoir-être* is translated as 'power-to-be'. Yet, I want to emphasise that *pouvoir-être* is Ricoeur's translation of Heidegger's *Seinkönnen*, potentiality-of-being. This demonstrates once more the importance of Heidegger as Ricoeur's partner in conversation since the human understanding of one's authentic potentiality-

of-being forms, for Heidegger, the very heart of his conception of the human capacity to understand their own mode of being beyond the everyday focus on innerworldly beings. For Ricoeur, the actual, everyday world is suspended by the imagination in order to be potentialised in the world of the text. This potentialisation by fiction implies that the connection with actual reality has not simply been severed. Rather, Ricoeur offers once more a Kantian reinterpretation of Heidegger's *Seinkönnen*. Kant speaks of the quickening effect of the imagination, which for him is in the first place a feeling.²⁰ In *The Rule of Metaphor*, Ricoeur still uses the same image of life and the enlivening effect to account for the particular hermeneutic experience at stake in the semantic innovation of metaphor. Yet, in his account of literature and narrative, he opts for a more ontological terminology in order to emphasise that the question of literature does not so much concern the psychic life of subjects and their feelings, but rather concerns the imaginative *world* displayed by the text. Therefore, instead of the enlivening effect of literature, Ricoeur speaks of its potentialisation: the literary imagination presents the world *in its potentiality*, invented by the imagination.

This brings us to the essence of literature as experiment. Analogous to Dilthey's suggestion that the imagination offers variations of the experiences of our psychic life, Ricoeur notes that the different possible worlds presented by the imagination are variations of our being-in-the-world.²¹ He adds that these variations should be understood as imaginative variations in Husserl's sense. This means that literature 'generates an open, endless manifold of variations' that aims at discovering an *invariant* that is shared by all these variations.²² For Ricoeur, the particular invariant disclosed by these variations is nothing less than the potentiality-of-being of human existence. In this sense, literature conducts experiments that contribute to an understanding and experience of this invariant. By the presentation of this potentiality-of-being, our understanding of the world we inhabit and of the selves we are, will be transformed, as Ricoeur immediately adds to the previous sentence: 'Everyday reality is thereby metamorphosed by what could be called the imaginative variations that literature carries out on the real.'²³ Apparently, the possibilities of existence and experience invented by literature provoke and demand to think human existence in terms of this potentiality-of-being or power-to-be. This invariant – and at this point Ricoeur deviates from a strict Husserlian usage of the notion of imaginative variation – can never be fully appropriated by the understanding; there is no *Wesensschau* possible, nor an authentic appropriation *à la* Heidegger; the understanding rather depends on the literary imagination to sense this invariant's demand to be thought.

III. CONTINGENCY AND THE CONFINES OF CONFIGURATION

We've established in which sense Ricoeur emphasises the ontological and cognitive importance of products of the imagination and literature. Yet, there are elements in his theory of narrativity and the literary text that tend to impose boundaries on what or how literature can actually present this invariant. In this section, by concentrating on some aspects of his theory of configuration, I want to argue that the boundaries imposed by the notion of configuration are in some respects counterproductive and in a specific sense at odds with his determination of the specific ontological stakes of literature.

At this point, I do not want to describe in any detail his threefold account of mimesis as developed in *Time and Narrative*, but simply summarise it as follows. Despite his interest in the idea of a plot, which ties together characters, actions, situations, events, and so on, in an understandable unity, thus creating what he calls a discordant concordance, Ricoeur is well aware that our everyday world and our lives and actions do not let themselves be understood in terms of such a plot. Nevertheless, our everyday world does harbor different structures that prefigure or anticipate such a unity, albeit in a fragmented way. Therefore, the suspension of our everyday world is necessary to offer the imagination the possibility for emplotment, for gathering together the different elements in the unity of a story that can be followed. Hence, this unity does not belong to our experience of the world we inhabit, but is rather the supplement and the genuine product of the act of configuration. Nevertheless, despite this imaginative unity by which the story presents a totality that enables our understanding of what happens in the story, this literary distancing does not make a return to the world we inhabit impossible. In addition to prefiguration and configuration, Ricoeur distinguishes a third element of literary mimesis, namely refiguration, which describes how the configurations of the literary imagination can be applied to the world we inhabit and to our self-understanding. Literature provides different figures with which to understand our power-to-be and our power-to-act.

Thus, the idea of the unity of a plot clearly meets certain cognitive needs: confronted with the fragmented reality of everyday life, the configuration of a story offers a unity of the time of action, allowing us to understand this time. Yet, it remains to be seen whether this rather strict need for unity does not weaken the ontological stakes of the literary imagination.

In order to clarify where my concern comes from, let me return to Dilthey's distinction between a retrospective understanding and a forwardly oriented re-experiencing. The understanding indeed presupposes a life-nexus, as Ricoeur notes in reference to Dilthey.²⁴ Yet, for Dilthey, the goal of the imagination is not exhausted by this attempt to understand retroactively. Rather, it seems to find its true fulfilment in the new experience it offers, in Dilthey's *Nacherleben*, which is a forwardly oriented experiencing. This idea of a forwardly oriented experience indicates that the experience of something meaningful

does not presuppose an already completed unity. This raises the question of whether Ricoeur's insistence on a plot for the literary imagination does not privilege the retrospective understanding and whether it does not rob us from a forwardly oriented experience. In fact, confronted with the difference between understanding and re-experiencing, one should ask the question of whether refiguration cannot adopt these two different senses: is refiguration limited to the attempt, for instance, to understand one's own being and action in light of the unity proposed by certain stories, or can it also concern the reader's lively experiences of their own being and acting?²⁵ The latter form of refiguration does not demand the same strict sense of unity in the concept of emplotment as the former does. To add another question to clarify the impact of the Diltheyan difference: What if a literary experiment does not offer a clear plot or a clear unity of action or of character, but rather seems to be concerned with presenting a *disfiguration*, that is, with a resistance to offer a clear figure or form in the unity of its narration?²⁶ While such an experiment might not offer the possibility of a refiguration in the sense of understanding one's existence in light of the (temporal) figure offered by the narrative, there seems to be no reason to assume that it could not offer the possibility of re-experiencing in Dilthey's sense.

The above remarks and questions concern the form of the literary image, but the Diltheyan distinction also affects the content, that is, the particular ontological commitment of the literary experiment. Recall that Ricoeur borrows a Heideggerian term to describe these stakes, namely potentiality-of-being. Heidegger discovers this potentiality-of-being especially in his account of the phenomenon of death as the ultimate possibility of Dasein's existence.²⁷ Since one cannot experience one's own death in actuality, one can only relate to one's own death as possibility and, more precisely, as imminent possibility: I can die at any moment. Consequently, from a Heideggerian perspective the nexus (*Ganzheit*) of Dasein's existence cannot be understood in terms of a unity offered by a configuration: the 'end' of this totality, death, cannot be understood retrospectively since a retrospective understanding would depict one's own death as past, as actualised; and this deprives the phenomenon of one's own death of its basic determination: death is only given to us as future, imminent possibility.²⁸ In fact, in Heidegger's case, Dilthey's forward-oriented re-experiencing is replaced by a forward-oriented understanding. Death is the phenomenon of the end of Dasein's existence, but only as an end that is imminent and that is to come. Moreover, to relate to one's own death as possibility is to understand or experience one's own existence as one that can also *not* be (or that can be *otherwise*). Although Heidegger would probably deem the term 'contingency' to be too metaphysical, the description in the previous sentence brings to mind exactly this notion: the experience of the contingency of one's own existence forms the heart of his account of potentiality-of-being. Death is a figure of the contingency of Dasein's existence, which can only be understood as imminent and can, therefore, never be considered retrospec-

tively. This Heideggerian interpretation of potentiality-of-being is, hence, at odds with Ricoeur's retrospective oriented understanding that favors the unity of a configuration. Two examples from *Oneself as Another* allow me to demonstrate the implications of this difference in more detail.

First, consider the following quote on the (non-)relation of contingency, event and configuration:

The paradox of emplotment is that it inverts the effect of contingency, in the sense of that which could have happened differently or which might not have happened at all, by incorporating it in some way into the effect of necessity or probability exerted by the configuring act. The inversion of the effect of contingency into an effect of necessity is produced at the very core of the event [...]. The necessity is a narrative necessity whose meaning effect comes from the configuring act as such [...].²⁹

This quote states that the act of configuration expels the experience of contingency from a story. Although Ricoeur acknowledges that an event in the strong sense of the word threatens the unity of a plot, he also argues that an event is only an event *in a story* if it contributes to the unity of the plot. Yet, an event contributes in this way only if the story offers a retrograde understanding of it and 'transmutes' the very contingency of the event 'into fate'.³⁰ In fact, for Ricoeur, the retroactive organisation *should* expel contingency because this contingency of reality constitutes its very 'elusive character'.³¹ Ricoeur thus employs a distinction: the lived experience of contingency confuses, whereas the retroactive organisation of the configurative act offers figures for understanding. However, if the literary experiment is concerned with this contingency, how can the emphasis on retroactive understanding offer an experience of contingency? How can it provoke and demand thought to think it? Might there not be the possibility of a forward-oriented understanding and can literature not also present the strange phenomenon that Heidegger aims to think, namely the imminent event of Dasein's death, which cannot become part of a retroactively understood totality of life? In a recent interview on his latest novel *4321*, Paul Auster tells the story of the lightning bolt he witnessed when he was fourteen years old. While walking in the forests, a storm broke and the novelist describes: 'I was standing just behind a boy who climbed under a fence when all of a sudden the lightning struck him. [...] Then I realised: everything can happen, at any time, to anyone.'³² The event that is at stake here – and which returns in *4321* – is not the event that has been transformed into the character's fate by being included in the plot of a story, but rather concerns the experience of the very contingency of existence.

Second, Heidegger's attention to an authentic potentiality-of-being also implies that Dasein is and understands itself as a nullity, which in the first place means that there is no whatness or essence to Dasein's being except for this potentiality-of-being.³³ Interestingly enough, Ricoeur's discussion on the relation between *idem* and *ipse*-identity in human selfhood in *Oneself as Another* seems to find its limits exactly in the literary portrayal of human selfhood in terms of such a nullity. Again, he encounters these limits due to his adherence to the notion of configuration. Let me explain this.

Ricoeur suggests that literature offers experiments with this dialectical relation between *idem* and *ipse*.³⁴ He adds that certain forms of literature tend to portray human narrative identity in such a way that it lacks the support of the *idem*-identity, that is, of whatness. The example he refers to in this context is Musil's famous *The Man Without Qualities*. Indeed, when literature creates forms of narration that truly allow humans without qualities or properties to appear in the story, human selfhood is presented in its 'nullity'.³⁵ If we understand literature as the imaginative variation of this potentiality-of-being, Musil's novel is a perfect example of one of these variations because this potentiality can be presented as the absence of whatness. Yet, rather than understanding Musil's novel as indeed such a crucial example, Ricoeur mainly worries that these examples reach the limits of his theory of emplotment:

To see more clearly the philosophical issues in this eclipse of the identity of the character, it is important to note that, as the narrative approaches the point of annihilation of the character, the novel also loses its own properly narrative qualities [...]. To the loss of the identity of the character thus corresponds the loss of the configuration of the narrative and, in particular, a crisis of the closure of the narrative.³⁶

These stories are marked by a 'crisis of the closure of the narrative'. Yet, this crisis is basically due to the fact that the narrative does not complete its retrospective organisation. This is the crisis of a narrated event whose transformation into a mere part of the retroactively understood fate of this character is not concluded. Yet, why to understand this as a problem? Rather than failing to close, should we not say that this narrative form *disfigures* the narrative model of configuration so that another experience of the event and of the nexus of a life is presented: not a retroactive one, but one with a forward orientation? If this is the case, it simply offers a fully-fledged literary experiment with human selfhood.

Ricoeur himself is fully aware of this strange conflict between the ontological impact of literature and the theoretical confines of configuration imposed on the literary imagination by his account of narrative. In fact, towards the end of the sixth study of *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur acknowledges the importance of the disfiguration at work in stories such as Musil's: 'The self refigured

here by the narrative is in reality confronted with the hypothesis of its own nothingness.³⁷ The refiguration, that is, the application of the presentation of the self by a novel such as Musil's to one's self, is in fact a disfiguration: its effect is that the self is robbed from all figures by which the self seeks to identify itself. Yet, as Ricoeur notes in the same quote, this nothingness is not simply nothing. Rather, this nothingness of whatness or essence is the reverse of the basic potentiality-of-being that literature proposes.³⁸

Exactly at these points, without properly acknowledging it, Ricoeur seems to step beyond the confines of his own account of emplotment. After all, especially narratives such as Musil's disclose the potentiality-of-being in all its 'nakedness' by robbing the self of all senses of sameness, essence and whatness. Moreover, the literary imagination's presentation of the human's potentiality-of-being is not only a portrayal of the self as the one who can try anything. Rather, this literary disclosure comes equipped with a specific call, a provocation or demand: to read literature is not only to enjoy the different worlds one could inhabit and to contemplate the different possibilities of being and acting that are opened up in this way, but 'reading also includes a moment of impetus', as Ricoeur adds, and he explains: 'This is when reading becomes a provocation to be and to act differently. However this impetus is transformed into action only through a decision whereby a person says: Here I stand!'³⁹ To hear in the presentation or disclosure of human potentiality-of-being a call to be and to act differently, is to hear the demand for a decision to adopt a certain mode of existence. Such a decision is reflected in a commitment – 'Here I stand', as Ricoeur repeats after Levinas – which is not without relation to the resoluteness – *Entschlossenheit* – Heidegger introduces to describe how Dasein is involved in and committed to the disclosure of its own potentiality-of-being.⁴⁰ Ricoeur himself notes that this call for commitment is most pressing in those stories 'which go so far as to paralyse the capacity for firm action', because they present the self as detached from and not supported by any form of 'whatness' or permanence in the self itself.⁴¹ Yet, why grant such a crucial role to these stories when they seem to escape from the normal model of literary configuration?

IV. THE LITERARY EXPERIMENT AND THE POTENTIALITY NOT TO ...

I've noted in the introduction that Agamben and Ricoeur seem to have similar conceptions of literature as experiment. In section 2, I analysed how for Ricoeur the notion of potentiality-of-being describes what is at stake in the literary experiment. In section 3, I showed how this leaves us with the question of contingency as one of the possible interpretations of this sense of potentiality that Ricoeur cannot properly integrate into his account of the literary experiment because of the confines the notion of configuration im-

poses on his conception of literature. I will now turn to Agamben because for him the literary experiment conducted in *Bartleby, the Scrivener* concerns exactly potentiality and contingency, that is, they are the very object of this literary experiment.⁴²

In terms of the concluding remarks of the previous section, the choice for *Bartleby, the Scrivener* is felicitous because of the character of Bartleby, who changes in the course of the story from a highly industrious clerk – someone whose existence, like the clerk depicted in Gogol's *The Overcoat* before his encounter with the overcoat, is truly *identical* to being a clerk and whose very essence or whatness is being-a-clerk – into someone who refuses everything in the reality in which he exists. Hence, his story exemplifies stories 'which go so far as to paralyse the capacity for firm action'. While for Ricoeur this seems to be a problem that can only be overcome by firmly taking a stand, Agamben's analysis of this figure's incapacity to act goes into a fundamentally different direction.

For Agamben, Bartleby's transformation exemplifies that the heart of the human capacity to act is not to be found in the actualisation of this capacity. Rather, this capacity concerns the human potential *not* to act. Bartleby transforms into this potential not to act. In this sense, even though the story has a clear configuration in a *formal* sense, this configuration does not offer us a clear portrayal of the actions or the inner development of the main character. Rather, in the story, Bartleby seems to be the locus where the character disappears and his name becomes the cipher of absence – absence of action, absence of inner considerations or thoughts, and so on. In this sense, the possibility of refiguration becomes impossible if refiguration is supposed to portray the multitude of different actions one can undertake in different circumstances: Bartleby becomes an empty place in the world depicted by the narrator of the story, as if Bartleby simply refuses to participate in this world and refuses to adopt the role awarded to him – first in the office and subsequently in the world. Yet, as Agamben insists, Bartleby does not become nothing. Rather, for Agamben, Bartleby becomes the cipher of potentiality itself. In the world of the text, he becomes the one who presents human potentiality since not to act is not simply a negativity or incapacity; it rather concerns the basic constituent of human potentiality, namely that the human *can also not act*; humans can also not contribute to or participate in the order in which they find themselves.

This leads to yet another sense of potentiality-of-being than we have encountered so far. (a) For Ricoeur, this potentiality is presented in the very world of the text since, for him, the world of the text proposes a possible world which I could inhabit. Yet, the comprehensibility that is demanded from this world, reflected in the concept of configuration, comes at a particular cost: the potentiality presented loses its dimension of contingency. This is most clearly reflected in the sense of the event and its experience encountered in the story. For the reader, the narrated events are experienced as

contributing to the fate of the character rather than to the contingency of what happens. (b) Contingency, however, is crucial for the second sense of potentiality, namely that of Heidegger. While Ricoeur refers to Heidegger's conception of potentiality-of-being, he is not able to retain this sense of contingency. This Heideggerian form of contingency concerns in the first place the imminence of the possible. By this emphasis, the notion of the event retrieves a fundamentally different sense: it concerns an event to come and can be experienced as the imminent and unexpected change of what is or of what I am. This is another form of a potentialisation of what is. (c) Agamben also emphasises the crucial role of contingency for a sense of potentiality to which literary experiments strive. Yet, the sense of contingency he employs is different from Heidegger's. What *Bartleby, the Scrivener* presents is not a phenomenon comparable to the imminence of death, the unexpected event that may or may not come at this very moment. The figure of Bartleby does not present contingency as the imminence of potentiality but rather as the *insistence* and the *resistance* of potentiality over against the actuality of the world in which Bartleby finds himself. In order to draw out the differences with the other two accounts of potentiality in relation to contingency, let me briefly explain what happens to the event in this story according to Agamben.

The story offers one crucial ingredient to understand the erratic behavior of the enigmatic clerk. This ingredient is disclosed at the end of the story, when the narrator informs the reader that Bartleby used to work at the Dead Letter Office, which is an office in which letters that have not been delivered to the intended addressees are collected. For Agamben, this Dead Letter Office is nothing less than the reverse image of actuality: rather than (a) collecting events that have taken place, as the story does to configure them in the unity of a plot that discloses the fates of the characters to the readers, and rather than (b) presenting an event that remains forever in abeyance, as the event of death in Heidegger's analysis, it (c) collects events that could have taken place but did not take place. Melville's depiction of the Dead Letter Office and the experience it offers, results in the following striking images:

Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters and assorting them for the flames? For by the cart-load they are annually burned. Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring: – the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity: – he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.⁴³

As Agamben comments, ‘undelivered letters are the cipher of joyous events that could have been, but never took place.’⁴⁴ These letters do not narrate events that happened, but are supplements to the events that did happen and place the latter in light of what did not happen. This juxtaposing of what is and what is not or of what happened and what did not happen is the basic sense of potentiality: the potential is what can and can also not be, what can but can also not happen. In this way, the dead letters collected in the office do not affirm what is, but offer an experience of them in light of their potentiality, that is, in light of what could have happened. Thus, it offers an experience of events not as contributing to the necessary fate of the characters, but rather it offers an experience of the fundamental contingency of what has happened. This also means that these letters, as ciphers of what could have happened, *resist* the closure of the story into a plot; they resist the transformation of events that happen (or do not happen) into events that *must* happen – either in the sense of the willful affirmation of the one to whom it happened or the fateful affirmation of their being included in a plot. In the story, Bartleby presents this resistance of a completed configuration and closed account of actions, events, characters, and so on that mark a plot in Ricoeur’s sense.

The sense of literature derived from this account of the letter, presented at the end of Melville’s story, is that of a supplement to the actual world. The experiments conducted by literature thus indeed concern this potentiality-of-being, which is hidden in the sheer positivity or actuality of what is, of the everyday world we inhabit. In this sense, the ontological commitments of Agamben’s literary experiments are in close proximity to those of Ricoeur. Yet, in another sense these experiments are different since they award a different sense and meaning to exactly those stories that depict the main character in their becoming-nothing.

In terms of his theory of literature, Ricoeur understands the breaking-down of the character in light of the breaking-down of the narrative form and, therefore, as something that belongs on the threshold or the limit of literature as narrative. Yet, what he seems to neglect is that the characters that are explored in these novels, such as the clerk Bartleby, do not only present a particular form of self-*understanding* in which the pole of sameness is removed and in which this is taken up retroactively by the understanding. Instead, they also present a form of self-experience that is forwardly oriented and that aims at being, living or acting in accordance with the sense of potentiality that resists actuality. If we, in a Ricoeurian fashion, understand the case of Bartleby as the paralysis of ‘the capacity for firm action,’ we might miss the point that in Bartleby, we do not simply encounter an incapacity to act, that is, a mere ‘I cannot act’, but rather the potentiality not to act, ‘I can also not act’.

In fact, the transformation of the clerk Bartleby is not the transformation of someone who can act into someone who cannot act, but rather the transformation of someone who cannot act – since his only actions are the automated, repetitive non-acts of which the work of a clerk consists – into someone who detaches himself from this automated, machine-like behavior by starting to use his capacity to not-act. In this sense, the self, stripped bare in this way, is not simply concerned with the ‘nakedness of the question’ concerning who I am, but rather concerns a mode of existence or a form of life, not unlike the one at stake in Heidegger’s description of Dasein’s *Seinkönnen*, in which Bartleby maintains himself in order to experience the potentiality-of-being. Here, indeed, the commitment of literary experiments is to offer an experience of being and acting differently, in which being is experienced as potentiality-of-being or contingency and in which acting is using one’s capacity not-to-act.

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NOTES

1. Kant 2007, 143 (§49, A 190).
2. Kant 2007, 155 (§53, A 213).
3. Agamben 1999, 260.
4. Ricoeur 1986, 7.
5. Ricoeur 1988, 249. See also Ricoeur 1984, 59: ‘one of the oldest functions of art [is] that it constitutes an ethical laboratory where the artist pursues through the mode of fiction experimentation with values’.
6. For the image of the laboratory, see, e.g., Ricoeur 1991b, 140, 148, 156, 159, 164.
7. Agamben 1999, 260.
8. See, e.g., Ricoeur 1991a, 88.
9. For the etymological relation between experience, experiment, and peril, see Romano 1998, 200.
10. This difference between a retrospective *Verstehen* and a forward *Nacherleben* in Dilthey’s thought is pointed out by Makkreel: ‘Doch weist die Wurzel des erleben im Wort Nacherleben darauf hin, daß dieser Terminus kein striktes Synonym für Verstehen ist, da Nacherleben die Vorwärtsbewegung von Erleben wieder einführt, die beim Verstehen umgedreht worden war’ (Makkreel 1991, 377).
11. Dilthey 2002, 234-36.
12. Ricoeur also mentions Husserl’s lifeworld in this context; in this article I will limit myself to the Heideggerian variant of this mode of being.
13. This is an old motive in Ricoeur’s work, see, e.g., Ricoeur 1969, 12-15.
14. See, e.g., Ricoeur 1960.
15. Ricoeur 2003, 358; my italics.
16. In Ricoeur’s work, one should, e.g., carefully distinguish the analyses of the symbol, the metaphor and the narrative, which each has its own sense of imagination or imaginary attached to it and each would require a somewhat different analysis to make a similar point as the one I’m making here.
17. The concept of distanciation plays a multifarious role in Ricoeur’s work, see e.g. Van der Heiden 2010, 72-89.
18. Ricoeur 1991a, 85-86.
19. Ricoeur 1991a, 86.
20. Kant speaks of *Belebung*, enlivening or quickening, see Kant 2007, 145 (§49, A 196); see also Schmidt 2012, 147-148.
21. A more elaborate and detailed account of how our being-in-the-world or the lifeworld is the point of departure for the literary imagination can be found in Ricoeur’s analysis of what he calls *mimesis*₁, see Ricoeur 1984, 54-64.
22. Husserl 1939, 411 (§87).
23. Ricoeur 1991a, 86.

24. Ricoeur 1991b, 141.
25. It is true, as one of the referee's noted, that Ricoeur's account of metaphor does not suffer from the same insistence on unity as his account of emplotment does since metaphor is a semantic innovation born from a displacement and not from a gathering together in a unity, as I've discussed in Van der Heiden 2010, 139-154. However, for Ricoeur, the ontological commitment of metaphor is limited to a redescription of reality, i.e., it is still oriented towards the ostensive function of language and only transforms particular descriptions and does not concern a refiguration of the human's being-in-the-world.
26. Lacoue-Labarthe 2002, 106. See also Van der Heiden 2010, 88-89.
27. Heidegger 1967, §§48-53.
28. Heidegger 1967, §48.
29. Ricoeur 1991b, 142.
30. Ricoeur 1991b, 147.
31. Ricoeur 1991b, 162.
32. De Veen 2017.
33. Heidegger 1967, §58.
34. Ricoeur 1991b, 148.
35. Ricoeur 1991b, 167.
36. Ricoeur 1991b, 149.
37. Ricoeur 1991b, 166-167.
38. Ricoeur links this even to a remarkable capacity of the human being: 'the imagination that says, "I can try anything"' (Ricoeur 1991b, 167).
39. Ricoeur 1988, 249.
40. Heidegger 1967, §55. It leads too far to analyse Ricoeur's position between Heidegger and Levinas at this point. I will limit myself to saying that the analysis of the sixth study clearly anticipates the account of attestation with which Ricoeur concludes (see Ricoeur 1991b, 350-356 in which Ricoeur explicitly positions himself with respect to Heidegger and Levinas). It is clear, though, also in connection to the quote from *Time and Narrative* referred to above that Ricoeur's main objection to Heidegger with respect to this notion of commitment concerns the lack of any elaborated notion of justice in the latter's thought. See also Kemp 1996.
41. Ricoeur 1991b, 167.
42. Agamben 1999, 260-261.
43. Melville 2002, 34.
44. Agamben 1999, 269.

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