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The JRC’s Conference Proceedings series represents a selection of papers presented at the annual Graduate Religion Students Association Interdisciplinary Conference, hosted by Concordia University, Montréal, QC.

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Bodied Time and Ghosted Narrative in *The Body Artist*

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Mr. Tuttle, the man who appears in Lauren Hartke’s house after her husband’s death in *The Body Artist*, hearkens back to another perplexing and ghostly stranger in American literature, Bartleby the Scrivener. Both men are so neutral in appearance as to be on the verge of disappearing: Bartleby is described as “motionless” and “sedate,” his face “leanly composed; his gray eyes dimly calm” (10). Similarly, there is “something elusive in [Mr. Tuttle’s] aspect...a thinness of physical address.” When Lauren searches for Mr. Tuttle, she looks for a man who looks “Like someone you could easily miss. Like someone you technically see but don’t quite register in the usual interpretive way.” Mr. Tuttle evades interpretation not only in the way he looks, but also in the way he speaks. His words are unmoored, without reference, especially at first. Even when he begins to speak in the voices of Lauren and her dead husband, Rey Robles, Lauren struggles to recognize her own words: “After a while she began to understand what she was hearing. It took many levels of perception. ... She tried to understand what she was hearing” (51). In the same way, Bartleby’s simple statement, “I would prefer not to,” perplexes Melville’s narrator, leaving him “in perfect silence,” with “stunned faculties,” “turned into a pillar of salt” (10-11). Mr. Tuttle’s peculiarly non-referential first words, “It is not able,” echo Bartleby’s famous refusal, “I would prefer not to.” While many critics have convincingly read Bartleby’s passive resistance as a rejection of the processes of capitalism, I wish to focus on the way both Bartleby’s refusal and Mr. Tuttle’s idiom subvert narrative and trouble the question of identity. Lauren muses that Mr. Tuttle lives “in a kind of time that had no narrative quality” (65), thus linking chronology with narrative. Mr. Tuttle, seeming not to be able to distinguish between past, present, and future, sidesteps human narrative processes, like the correct use of

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1 Herman Melville, *Bartleby and Benito Cereno* (New York: Dover, 1990) 8, 9.
verb tenses, and in doing so undermines the question of his own personal narrative. In her performance of a piece that takes its cues from Mr. Tuttle’s evasion of narrative time, Lauren embodies a self-definition that operates through subversion, subtraction, and refusal. The novel, and particularly the echoes of “Bartleby” in the novel, thus illuminates the possibility of using the body to subvert personal narrative and narrative time in order to pare away the complex of associations that constitutes identity, thereby accessing a leaner, more potent experience of the self.

Both Melville’s narrator and Lauren believe that they can demystify their visitors by learning their origins. Alarmed by his discovery that Bartleby is living in the office, the lawyer thinks of sending him back to “his native place, wherever that might be,” and so asks him:

“Will you tell me, Bartleby, where you were born?”
“I would prefer not to.”
“Will you tell me anything about yourself?”
“I would prefer not to.” (19)

There is a similar exchange between Lauren and Mr. Tuttle:

“Where is your mother? When I say mother, the woman who gives birth to a child, the parent, the female parent, does this word? Tell me. What?”

... 

“If there is another language you speak,” she told him, “say some words.”
“Say some words.”
“Say some words. Doesn’t matter if I can’t understand.”
“Say some words to say some words.” (55)

Bartleby and Mr. Tuttle foil the attempts to locate them in a stable biography, and Mr. Tuttle, like Bartleby, prefers not to speak. He turns Lauren’s command back on itself, pointing, perhaps, to the insufficiency of verbal communication—a tendency Lauren picks up on earlier, when he again parrots and subverts her command: “Talk to me. I am talking.” Then, Lauren notes “a certain futility in his tone, an endlessness of effort, suggesting things he could not easily make clear to her no matter how much he said” (46). Mr. Tuttle’s way of speaking, which combines and reconfigures words spoken in the past, present, and future, is, in fact, “another language,” but it is stranger to Lauren than a
foreign language. Though she is irritated by his final statement, calling him a “little creep,” it changes her thinking. When she listens to the tape recording she’s made of their conversation, her own name strikes a false chord: “She heard herself say, ‘I am Lauren,’ like a character in black spandex in a science fiction film” (56). It is as if their exchange has unsettled the meaning of her name and, by extension, her identity. By speaking that name, she is saying some words to say some words, words which are burdened by connotation. Furthermore, Mr. Tuttle leads Lauren to more general conclusions about human identity:

> In sleep he was no more unknowable than anyone else. Look. . . . This is what you feel, looking at the hushed and vulnerable body, almost anyone’s, or you lie next to your husband after you’ve made love and breathe the heat of his merciless dreams and wonder who he is, tenderly ponder the truth that you’ll never know, because this is the secret that sleep protects in its neural depths, in its stages, layers and folds. (54)

It occurs to Lauren that knowledge of another person is an illusion revealed as such by sleep. Waking, people talk and move, expressing their purported identities, but their sleeping selves resist interpretation. Failing to talk and move in the expected ways, Mr. Tuttle is a mystery all the time. This mystery is a creative catalyst for Lauren. She tries out different explanations for him:

> Maybe this man experiences another kind of reality when he is here and there, before and after, and he moves from one to the other shatteringly, in a state of collapse, minus an identity, a language . . . She thought maybe he lived in a kind of time that had no narrative quality. What else did she think? She sat in the nearly bare office on the second floor and didn’t know what else she thought. (64-65)

And later: “She found it interesting to think that he lived in overlapping realities. Many things are interesting, fool, but nowhere near true. . . . She liked to think. What did she like to think?” (82-83) Lauren’s failure to decipher Mr. Tuttle, her struggle to reconcile what she sees in Mr. Tuttle and what she understands to be possible or “true,” stretches her mind in a way that is analogous to the effect of her physical exercises on her body. Her exercises “extend the limit” of her physical capabilities just as Mr. Tuttle probes the limits of her belief and her need, above all, for a believable narrative from him. While she tells him, in the beginning, “I will give you a chance to tell me who you are. But I don’t want someone in my house. I will give you a chance . . . But I will not wait indefinitely” (46), she does, in the end, wait indefinitely without ever finding out who he is.
Mr. Tuttle’s critique of speech—“Say some words to say some words”—is part of a larger critique of logic enacted by his words and presence. In reply to Lauren’s question, “But how could you be living here without my knowing?” Mr. Tuttle says, “‘But you know. I am living.’ He half hit himself on the cheek, a little joke perhaps” (69). Again, Mr. Tuttle turns Lauren’s question back on itself, converting her past tense to present tense and countering her incredulity with the incontrovertible fact of his body. Mr. Tuttle’s bodied contradiction of Lauren’s sense of reason is mirrored in Bartleby’s bodied resistance. Bartleby rebels by standing still: by refusing to come when called, and most notably, by refusing to leave the office. More specifically, his subversion of the narrator’s logic is figured bodily. His bearing, more than anything he says, gives him an enigmatic intellectual authority:

It seemed to me that, while I had been addressing him, he carefully revolved every statement that I made; fully comprehended the meaning; could not gainsay the irresistible conclusion; but, at the same time, some paramount consideration prevailed with him to reply as he did. (11)

Furthermore, Bartleby presents his body as support for his decision to stop working, replying to the lawyer, “Do you not see the reason for yourself?” (21). The narrator supposes that the scrivener is referring to his fatigued eyes. But Bartleby’s “reason” for refusing may be more general and ideological, and so fundamental, or perhaps obvious, that he refuses to articulate it. Indeed, Bartleby undermines the very foundation of the narrator’s reason:

It is not seldom the case that, when a man is browbeaten in some unprecedented and violently unreasonable way, he begins to stagger in his own plainest faith. He begins, as it were, vaguely to surmise that, wonderful as it may be, all the justice and all the reason is on the other side. (11)

The halting syntax of the second sentence and the double-negative of the first betray the erosion in the narrator’s “own plainest faith”—in other words, Bartleby’s concision and silence destabilize the narrator’s fussy, indirect rhetoric. Mr. Tuttle also appears to have his own opaque but compelling way of thinking: “He dropped his head and appeared to think about these matters as if working out the details of a complicated problem” (44). Both Bartleby and Mr. Tuttle counter the logic of their interlocutors with their own modes of speech, silence, and action, eliciting more patience than the interlocutors can themselves account for. Lauren treads lightly around Mr. Tuttle from the start: “She tried not to press him for information. She found the distance interesting, the halting quality of his
speech and actions” (44-45). The attorney is also “disarmed,” “touched,” and “disconcerted” by an unnamable quality in Bartleby (11).

What is finally most unnamable about Mr. Tuttle is when he exists. Speaking, as he does, from the past or future, the very presence of his body becomes an impossibility. The challenge of reconciling the realness of Mr. Tuttle’s body with his uncanny or supernatural abilities leads Lauren to a flexible, spatial conception of time—a time whose bounds expand and contract. Mr. Tuttle affects Lauren’s experience of time almost immediately. On the first day, Lauren reflects, “It was only midmorning but she had the feeling he’d been here a week. They sat and looked at last night’s fire” (47). Here, DeLillo juxtaposes two different ideas of time: the remains of the previous night’s fire point to a concrete passage of time, between last night and midmorning, while Lauren’s sense that Mr. Tuttle has been there for a week explodes the concepts of “last night” and “midmorning.” Furthermore, when Mr. Tuttle first speaks in the voices of Lauren and Rey, Lauren flees to her car, where she sits and continues to hear “the voice” and see “the hand gesture, unmistakably Rey’s”: “She didn’t know how long she was there. Maybe a long time. . . . How much time is a long time? Could be this, could be that” (52). “Could be this, could be that” recalls Mr. Tuttle’s air of contingency, of doing things “as if.” Lauren’s sense that “a long time” has no stable meaning indicates that she is beginning to explore a more dynamic understanding of time, one in which the character or quality of a moment is more important than its length as measured in minutes or hours. Later in the novel, speculating on how Mr. Tuttle works, Lauren thinks:

Maybe he falls, he slides, if that is a useful word, from his experience of an objective world, the deepest description of space-time, where he does not feel a sense of future direction—he slides into her experience, everyone’s, the standard sun-kissed chronology of events. (83)

Here, DeLillo posits a final, ultimate “description of space-time”: a pure present, in which the future is unfelt, non-existent. Mr. Tuttle enters Lauren’s standard chronology when he first imitates Lauren and Rey, sending her to sit in the car in the rain. She had been urging him to talk “about objects in the room” (50), about their ordinary, “sun-kissed” present, when he shows her, through the jump to Rey and Lauren, that the visible present (e.g., the objects in the room) is only one facet of “space-time.” That is, Mr. Tuttle gestures toward a total present that occupies a more extensive space than Lauren imagines.

Peter Boxall describes the experience of time in The Body Artist as the “evacuation of the moment,” which “is also a delivery into the very fibrous
material of the moment itself.” Mr. Tuttle points to time’s materiality through the way that he “moves” between “before and after . . . shatteringly” (64) or “falls” or “slides.” Lauren completes this bodily time in her performance piece, “Body Time,” which also rests on a spatial conception of time. Through her body and gestures, Lauren exposes time’s “sinewy dimensions.” Lauren’s friend, Mariella, describes the piece:

Here is a woman in executive attire, carrying a briefcase, who checks the time on her wristwatch and tries to hail a taxi. . . . She does this many times, countless times. Then she does it again, half-pirouetting in very slow motion. (106)

Lauren fleshes out the familiar gestures of a moment in order to reveal to her audience the hidden structure of this moment. Significantly, Lauren “glides . . . formally . . . from one action to the other,” suggesting an ordered nature to this slowed time, or suggesting that time can be understood through discipline and repetition. Writing on Falling Man, Boxall describes a DeLillian effect that applies to The Body Artist, as well:

The narrative attention to bodily detail . . . produces a kind of suspension in the narrative, a restorative lightness made from slowness, from mantric repetition, from counting out seconds, and ritual movements.4

The suspension that “Body Time” produces, however, is not clearly restorative. Lauren says that her work aims to “Stop time, or stretch it out, or open it up. Make a still life that’s living, not painted. When time stops, so do we. We don’t stop, we become stripped down, less self-assured. I don’t know” (107). Indeed, for all the force of her physical work, Lauren avoids saying things definitely; she herself is “less self-assured” in the interview, rephrasing as she goes, qualifying her words with “I don’t know,” and finally resisting Mariella’s interpretation of the piece as a reaction to Rey’s death: “I can’t and I can’t and I can’t” (109). Lauren’s body work is a movement toward instability, uncertainty, contingency: the “as if” that Mr. Tuttle teaches her. Her living still life, like Mr. Tuttle’s living recording of Lauren and Rey’s conversations, does not interpret but rather unsettles. Bartleby’s physical presence is similarly unnerving when he refuses to leave the office: “like the last column of some ruined temple, he remained

standing mute and solitary in the middle of the otherwise deserted room” (22). The narrator returns frequently to his assumption that Bartleby will leave, as if this assumption has the power to move Bartleby: “I assumed the ground that depart he must, and upon that assumption built all I had to say” (23). He realizes, though, that Bartleby “was more a man of preferences than assumptions.” Bartleby’s resistance of the narrator’s logic of assumption is figured physically, in his stance in the room, just as Lauren’s evasion of a single identity or interpretation is figured physically in her (largely still, or slow-moving) performance piece.

Lauren’s use of “stripped down” alludes to the way she works and grooms her body, a violent process:

She wax-stripped hair from her armpits and legs. It came ripping off . . . She had an acid exfoliating cream, hard-core, prescribed, and after she stripped the hair she rubbed in the cream to remove wastepapery skin in flakes and scales and little rolling boluses that she liked to hold between her fingers and imagine, unmorbidly, as the cell death of something inside her . . . She wanted it to hurt . . . She cut off some, then more of the hair on her head. It was crude work that became nearly brutal when she bleached out the color. (83-84)

The process of “becom[ing] a blankness,” as Lauren calls this process, is necessarily “brutal,” “hard-core,” painful, and severe. But she is drawn to this erasure; she looks with satisfaction on her dead skin cells as representatives of the death of something deeper, something interior, like her particular past, her habits or tendencies, her identity. Whether this process is ultimately constructive or destructive is the question that animates the end of the novel. A sentence following he passage quoted above changes the tenor of Lauren’s extreme physical preparation:

A hidden system, interesting, these tallowy secretions, glandular events of the body cosmos, small festers and eruptions, impacted fats, oils, salt and sweat, and how nearly scholarly the pleasures of extraction. (84)

This more measured, considered tone counters the extremity of the previous description and suggests that rather than being driven by the impulse to punish or negate her body, Lauren is driven by wonder. She probes her body’s mysteries, seeking to know what is seen and unseen in its “cosmos.” She is a scholar of the human body, an idea reinforced when she tells Mariella, “I’ve always felt smart in my body. I taught it to do things other bodies could not.”
try to analyze and redesign” (105). It is also notable that she reads to Mr. Tuttle “from a book on the human body” (60), and, specifically, from a section on the embryo, which embodies potentiality.

DeLillo describes his writing process in similar terms, emphasizing both the physicality of writing and its potential to radically change the self. He endows words and sentences with spatial qualities, with bodies, as it were:

the words typed on the white page have a sculptural quality. They form odd correspondences. They match up not just through meaning but through sound and look. . . I’m completely willing to let language press its meaning upon me. Watching the way in which words match up, keeping the balance in a sentence—these are sensuous pleasures. I type rather than write longhand because I like the way the words and letters look when they come off the hammers onto the page—finished, printed, beautifully formed.5

For DeLillo, the physical properties of letters, words, and sentences are essential to their meaning; or, the full dimensionality of a word’s meaning comes from its physical dimensions. Furthermore, DeLillo attends closely to textual rhythm: “The rhythm of a sentence will accommodate a certain number of syllables. One syllable too many, I look for another word.”6 Rhythm is an organizing principle of Lauren’s work, as well, which includes “prayerful spans of systematic breathing” (57) and of course the finely controlled, repeated gestures of her performance piece. DeLillo’s sense that words yield meaning, individually and together, through manual work is comparable to Lauren’s sustained work with gestures and to her interest in the “hidden system” of her body’s pores and glands. Furthermore, DeLillo claims:

Over the years it’s possible for a writer to shape himself as a human being through the language he uses. I think written language, fiction, goes that deep. He not only sees himself but begins to make himself or remake himself. Of course, this is mysterious and subjective territory.7

DeLillo’s insistence that artistic practice creates rather than reveals the self finds its expression in Lauren’s pursuit of the radical reformation of the body. Furthermore, mystery grounds both Lauren’s body work and DeLillo’s consideration of what writing does, for though Lauren tries to “analyze” her

6 Ibid.
7 DePietro 6-7.
body, its systems are hidden, in the end. The unknowability of her body adds dimension to her body work, as Mr. Tuttle’s unknowability deepens Lauren’s thinking about his dimensioned time.

The structure of *The Body Artist*, a series of scenes whose temporal relation is not clear, takes the reader out of time. Though the scenes are presumably presented in chronological order, they begin with no introduction and no indication of how much time has passed. “She was in town, driving,” gives way to “It was another slow morning, foggy and still,” or “She stood looking at him, two bodies in a room” (70, 73, 85), so that these scenes are untethered to any system of measuring time. They are also short; DeLillo writes in moments, withholding time markers. The result is that the novel’s narrative, like Bartleby’s and Mr. Tuttle’s, is elusive. Furthermore, DeLillo’s prose is spare, the least version of itself. The novel is structurally and stylistically analogous, then, to Lauren’s aesthetics of reduction: the whittling away of her body, her use of another voice to answer the phone. “I am Lauren,” she says towards the end, “But less and less” (117). Bartleby does less and less, too: his narrative, if any, is a series of refusals, first of proofreading, then copying, then moving, and then eating. Mr. Tuttle also rejects food “passively” and Lauren follows suit: “It was what she hadn’t thought of on her own” (94). But Lauren’s movement towards the minimum, her pursuit of a pared-down body that dwells in an ever-expanding present, leads her to the edge of collapse in the novel’s last pages. Lauren considers—indeed, tries to will—the possibility that when she enters the bedroom, she will be entering the last morning of Rey’s life and will have the opportunity to relive it. When Mr. Tuttle reanimates this final morning in his performance of Lauren and Rey’s last conversation (86), the novel circles back to where it left off when Rey left. Lauren wishes, similarly, to rewrite this narrative, editing out her husband’s end. But in the resolution or closing of possibility—“The room was empty when she looked” (124)—DeLillo pulls Lauren out of the suspended moment and back into time. The novel thus turns from infinite contingency, or not-knowing, towards an experience of living that is grounded in and limited by time: “She wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was” (124). Having followed Mr. Tuttle to the margins of movement, time, and language, Lauren now returns to a mode in which time only flows forward, a mode in which her body is subject to time rather than vice versa. On the verge of becoming a ghost who hovers outside of chronology, Lauren instead embraces mortality and all its limits; she asks time to reveal her identity. What Mr. Tuttle first suggests to Lauren, “a means of escape from the book-walled limits of the self” (48), turns out to be just that: an escape,
an interlude. Neither can Bartleby live in his suspended moment forever; his self-willed death, while it may be his strongest act of refusal, also puts his endless refusal, his particular moment of suspension, to an end. DeLillo finally proposes that we surrender our bodies to time and to their particular identities, even when these identities imperfectly describe who we are.
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