“I WOULD PREFER NOT TO” IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE IMPORTANCE OF DOING NOTHING *IN MY YEAR OF REST AND RELAXATION*

Chia-Chieh Mavis Tseng*

ABSTRACT. This essay argues for the value of doing nothing in the 21st century, challenging the pervasive belief that inactivity is synonymous with laziness or irresponsibility. In today’s “attention economy,” doing nothing has shifted from being a luxury to becoming a necessity. Rather than advocating for a complete withdrawal from technology or suggesting rest merely as a means to future productivity, this essay calls for a critical reassessment of how we allocate our time and attention in an increasingly interconnected world. By examining the growing cultural significance of non-doing and non-response in contemporary literature, it explores how these practices challenge the relentless demands of modern life. Central to this analysis are Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) and Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853). Through a comparative analysis of the protagonists’ acts of non-doing, I will argue that these forms of passive resistance reveal the hidden value of stepping outside the cycle of perpetual productivity and consumption.

KEY WORDS: Bartleby, digital age, doing nothing, attention economy, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

Introduction

This essay argues for the value of doing nothing in the digital age, exploring how these acts are represented and reimagined in 21st-century literature. While the thesis may initially seem counterintuitive—since doing nothing is often equated with laziness or apathy, and ghosting criticized as irresponsible or immature—recent critics have highlighted the potential power of inactivity, non-response, and unavailability in today’s world. In the “attention

* Chia-Chieh Mavis Tseng (Ph.D in Comparative Literature, Rutgers University, New Jersey, 2013) is Director of and Associate Professor at the Language Center of Taipei Medical University, with an interest in visual culture, urban modernity, and the works of Amy Levy, Kate Chopin, Virginia Woolf, Kazuo Ishiguro, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Tati. Her most recent book is *Memory Made, Hacked, and Outsourced* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023). E-mail: mavistseng@tmu.edu.tw.

economy," doing nothing is no longer a luxury reserved for the privileged; rather, non-doing and non-response are increasingly vital in the 21st century. This essay does not advocate for a complete abandonment of technology or a retreat into isolation; rather, it calls for a shift in how we direct our attention, reassess how we spend our time, and recognize the importance of one's right to do or say nothing in an always-connected, 24/7 society.

This research explores the growing significance of non-doing and non-response in 21st-century literature. Focusing on Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) and Herman Melville's Bartleby, the Scrivener," I examine how Moshfegh's female protagonist embodies Bartleby's passive resistance—his famous refrain, "I would prefer not to"—in the context of the digital age. Through this comparison, I analyze the similarities and differences in their approaches to non-engagement, the practices they adopt, and the personal and social transformations that result.

"Paying" Your Attention in the Digital Age

In the 21st century, we are immersed in addictive technologies that fuel a culture of busyness, where multitasking and productivity are highly valued in our fast-paced society. In her 2007 bestseller *One Person / Multiple Careers: A New Model for Work/Life Success*, Marci Alboher encourages people to embrace "slash" careers—balancing multiple roles—by leveraging technology that enables work from anywhere. The pervasive influence of social media and communication technologies has fundamentally altered how we direct our attention and use our time. It is now crucial to critically examine the (non-)neutrality of these technologies and reflect on the user experience. We must ensure that technology serves us, rather than the other way around.

Tristan Harris (2017), former design ethicist at Google, explains how our minds are unwittingly hijacked by our phones, with a few tech companies exerting unethical control over billions of people every day. Social media, websites, apps, and digital platforms all share one hidden agenda: to capture and monopolize our attention, maximizing both our emotional and time investments. Throughout the day, we are constantly bombarded by information, news, pop-up ads, and notifications. On YouTube, "in-video links" and "autoplay" push us into endless viewing cycles. Streaming services like Netflix, Apple+, and Disney+ prompt us to "skip to the next episode" or "autoplay the next episode," keeping us glued to the screen. Facebook, for example, programs its algorithm to favor provoca-

tive, controversial, and outrage-driven posts, because they generate more reactions and engagement: "Posts that prompted lots of reaction emojis tended to keep users more engaged, and keeping users engaged was the key to Facebook's business" (Merrill and Oremus). Even features like the "photo" tag are designed to vie for our attention. These seemingly trivial design choices collectively foster an "onto-the-next" mentality, contributing to the rise of the "attention economy."

We grow used to prompts to encourage us to express ourselves on social media (Facebook's "What's on your mind?"), to respond to things (for Facebook, options to hit "like," "haha," "wow," "sad" and "angry"); at work or in our social life, we receive and reply messages from all kinds of portals (IM, DM, LINE, whatsapp, emails), and fill out questionnaires via Google form or SurveyCake. Our online presence is getting mandatory and the time we spend online is getting longer and longer because of COVID-19. We have virtual meetings, online classes, and we work from home. All of a sudden we are requested to stay online, whether we like it or not.

Technology does bring us convenience; however, like drugs, it comes with side effects—it brings us confusion, anxiety, envy, self-doubts, or a new syndrome called FOMO (fear of missing out). One feels bad while being "unliked" or "unfollowed." Communication technologies allow us to reach other people at one click, anytime anywhere. Mary (Drew Barrymore) in the movie *He's Just Not That into You* (2009) once laments that new technology complicates dating culture which is more frustrating:

> I had a guy leave me a voice mail at work, so I called him at home. And then he e-mailed me to my Blackberry and so I texted to his cell and then he e-mailed me to my home account, and then the whole thing just got out of control. And I miss the days when you had one phone number and one answering machine. And that one answering machine housed one cassette tape. And that one cassette tape either had a message from the guy or it didn't. And now you just have to go around checking all these different portals just to get rejected by seven different technologies.

Communication technologies introduce a new culture to our dating, recruitment, business, or any other social circumstances. We will no longer have heartbreaking stories of lost mails, changed addresses, and missed calls… think about the lost phone number which keeps the hero and the heroine apart in the movie *Serendipity* (2001) or *Turn Left, Turn Right* (2003). In the digital age, if a message fails to get a reply—it is fair to conclude that the addressee simply does not want to respond.

In the past, we debated how quickly to respond to an email, careful not to reply too soon lest we appear desperate or too idle. Today, digital micro-communication users are far more concerned with the timing between text messages. As Jessica Bennett discusses in her 2014 article "Bubbles Carry a Lot of Weight: Texting Anxiety Caused by Little Bubbles," we experience what she calls "texting anxiety" when we see the "typing awareness indicator"—those little bubbles that show someone is drafting a response on iMessage, Facebook Messenger, or Google Chat. Bennett describes this as "the tyranny of the text bubble"—the modern-day technological minutiae that traps us in a specific kind of cognitive stress. She also explores the pressure of being perpetually available through mobile devices. The "typing awareness indicator" itself has become a message, signaling both "Hold on, I'm responding" and, paradoxically, "I'm not responding." As Ron Palmeri, founder of a communications start-up, notes, it's the digital equivalent of saying, "I'm here, but not quite yet."

The anxiety of receiving no response—coupled with the expectation of a prompt reply—brings us to the phenomenon of "ghosting," a term that gained widespread popularity by 2015. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, ghosting is defined as "the act or practice of abruptly cutting off all contact with someone (such as a former romantic partner), usually without explanation, by no longer accepting or responding to phone calls, instant messages, etc." Ghosting is especially common in online dating, where apps make it easy to meet new people, quickly disengage, and move on. As a result, ghosting has become a negative social behavior; not responding or severing ties without closure is seen as unacceptable. Many articles highlight how being ghosted can harm mental health and erode self-worth. We feel particularly hurt by ghosting because, as the saying goes, the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. Author Simon Sinek argues that ghosting reflects a lack of confrontation skills, calling it a bad habit that adults should outgrow. In response, websites like *End Ghosting* (https://end-ghosting.com) advocate for "no ghosting" in recruitment, while new dating apps like *Elate Date* (https://www.elatedate.com) market themselves as "designed for less swiping, less ghosting."

In short, digital culture prizes 24/7 availability online and condemns anything that contradicts this constant connectivity. Yet, interestingly, a 2018 study (Freedman et al.) of 1,300 participants found that 25% had ghosted someone, while 20% had been ghosted themselves. In other words, while ghosting is widely criticized, it remains a common practice. On the other hand, some defend ghosting, arguing that sometimes no response is the ap-

propriate response, and that it may be problematic to assume one is always entitled to a timely reply. Critics and writers are increasingly advocating for the value of "doing nothing," recognizing that, in the digital age, we are literally "paying" for our attention. Michael Greaney, for example, argues that we should actively cultivate our "laziness" in this attention economy:

> And it seems to me that the relentlessness with which we pay attention – and I think we can take the word pay literally in this context – suggests that there are no limits to the attention economy... If one of the effects of contemporary technology is to make us work even when we think we are playing, then the attention economy has succeeded in finding ways of cap-turing infinite labour from homo otiosus. Once upon a time, the work ethic taught us that human beings cannot afford to be lazy; however, if we are going to avoid being defined as creatures of the attention economy, then we can't afford not to be lazy. In fact, we're probably going to have to roll up our sleeves and work at it. (Greaney 2016: 188-89)

Ghosting, not responding, or choosing silence also finds its place in the realm of literature. Deleuze, for instance, discusses the "right to say nothing," noting that "the problem is no longer getting people to express themselves, but providing small gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces don't stop people from expressing themselves, but rather force them to express themselves. What a relief it is to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then can there be a chance of framing the rare, or ever rarer, thing that might be worth saying" (Deleuze 1995: 129). Similarly, Derrida explores the concept of "the right to absolute nonresponse," arguing that literature, which traditionally grants the "authorization to say everything" (a concept tied to democracy and the apparent hyper-responsibility of the "subject"), must also recognize the right to absolute nonresponse. As Jonathan Culler elaborates,

> absolute nonresponse might mean, for instance, Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" in Melville's story... The right to absolute nonresponse: this is startling, for this right, like the right to privacy, dose not seem to have been incorporated in our Bill of Rights—but it makes a good deal of sense. The right to nonresponse can be of essential feature of democracy, for it is totalitarian to require that one respond, to call one to answer for everything. (Culler 2013: 89)

Building on Culler's argument, the right to absolute nonresponse critiques the societal expectation of constant engagement and justification. In both litera-

ture and life, choosing not to respond becomes an act of resistance, offering freedom from the pressure to always be available or provide answers.

Doing Nothing

At this point, it is necessary to rethink and redefine concepts such as "labor," "productivity," "usefulness," "busyness," "leisure," "laziness," "off-time," "inactivity," as well as the rights to "idleness," "non-response," "withdrawal," "not answering," "no-shows," and "ghosting." Historically, busyness and labor have been linked to social status and moral value. As Henry Ford once stated, "To my mind, there is nothing worse than an idle life. Nobody should suffer that." The eight-hour workday movement, which emerged during the Industrial Revolution in Britain, was a response to the grueling 10- to 16-hour workdays of the time. Robert Owen, a founder of utopian socialism, famously advocated for "Eight hours labour, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest." A 19th-century silkscreen poster echoed this sentiment: "Eight hours for work, Eight hours for rest, and Eight hours for what we will." This final "what we will" was intended to include personal time for self-improvement, education, and leisure. In the modern "labor battle" over time, time has come to be seen primarily as an economic resource, making it difficult to justify spending it on "nothing." If someone chooses to do nothing when they are expected to be working, they are often seen as lazy, irresponsible, or unprofessional, failing to meet social expectations.

In 2006, Tom Lutz writes a book entitled *Doing Nothing: A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers, and Bums in America*. In recent years, however, books on doing nothing usually take a new perspective: Carolien Janssen's *Niksen: The Dutch Art of Doing Nothing* (2018), Jenny Odell's *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (2019), Olga Mecking's *Niksen: Embracing the Dutch Art of Doing Nothing* (2020), Tess Janson's *Niksen: The Power of Doing Nothing* (2020); and Celeste Headless's *Do Nothing: How to Break Away from Overworking, Overdoing, and Underliving* (2020). "Niksen" comes from Dutch philosophy of doing nothing, and is considered a coping strategy for stressful modern life. Carolien Hamming, managing director of a coaching center in Netherlands that serves people with stress and burnout, says Niksen means "to do nothing, to be idle or doing something without any use" (Hamming in Gottfried 2019). Doreen Dodgen-Magee, a psychologist and the author of "Deviced! Balancing Life and Technology in a Digital World," likens niksen to "a car whose engine is running but isn't going anywhere" (Dodgen-Magee in Mecking in *Times* 2019).

One of the earliest pioneers of doing nothing was Diogenes of Sinope, a philosopher who lived in 4th century BC Athens and later Corinth. Often described by Plato as "Socrates gone mad," Diogenes was famously known as "the man who lived in a tub." He rejected material possessions, embraced a life of laziness, and wandered the streets without purpose. Diogenes often subverted social norms by walking backward down the street or entering a theater as everyone was leaving. In the hustle of the city, "Diogenes, who had nothing to do and from whom no one was willing to ask anything, began at once to roll his tub up and down the Craneum with great energy. When asked why, his reply was, "Just to make myself look as busy as the rest of you" (Odell 2019: 66-67). When Alexander the Great once found him lounging in the sun and offered to grant him any wish, Diogenes famously responded, "Yes, stand out of my light" (Odell 2019: 67). Jenny Odell interprets Diogenes' actions as a lesson in refusal: "It's important to note that, faced with the unrelenting hypocrisy of society, Diogenes did not flee to the mountains (like some philosophers) or kill himself (like others). He neither assimilated to nor fully exited society; instead, he lived in its midst, in a permanent state of refusal" (Odell 2019: 68).

Similarly, in the late 19th century, Oscar Wilde addressed the value of doing nothing in his essay *The Critic as Artist* (1891): "Let me say to you now that to do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world, the most difficult and the most intellectual. To Plato, with his passion for wisdom, this was the noblest form of energy. To Aristotle, with his passion for knowledge, this was the noblest form of energy also." Wilde suggests that true intellectual clarity arises in moments of stillness, a sentiment echoed by Plato and Aristotle, who believed that wisdom and knowledge require space for reflection, not just active pursuit.

"I Would Prefer Not to"

When it comes to the themes of doing nothing, giving no (proper) answers, one can never ignore Herman Melville's 1853 short story: "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street." The story is told from the perspective of an old, experienced lawyer who runs a law office. Everything seems to work well until the new scrivener Bartleby shows up and challenges the pre-existing assumptions and social values. At first Bartleby appears to be a helpful employee. On the third day of his job, however, when asked to proofread a document with his colleagues, Bartleby replies "in a singularly mild, firm voice": "I would prefer not to" (Melville 1989: 165).

The narrator who has "haste and natural expectancy of instant compliance" finds this answer absurd and unacceptable:

> I sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying my stunned faculties. Immediately it occurred to me that my ears had deceived me, or Bartleby had entirely misunderstood my meaning. I repeated my request in the clearest tone I could assume. But in quite as clear a one came the previous reply, "I would prefer not to."
> "Prefer not to," echoed I, rising in high excitement, and crossing the room with a stride. "What do you mean? Are you moon-struck? I want you to help me compare this sheet here—take it," and I thrust it towards him.
> "I would prefer not to," said he. (Melville 1989: 165-66)

The narrator is giving an order, not asking a question, and Bartleby is not in a position to make any choices. The unexcused disobedience is regarded as perverse or pathological, an excess or violation of the social norm. Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" is a short-circuit, a faulty connection which occurs in an efficient network, in which the hierarchy of the workplace determines how people talk and act. With a mixed sense of confusion and indignation, the narrator tries to clarify his order, but in vain. His next move is to walk toward Bartleby and "thrust" the paper toward him, as if he is going to force him to do the task.

> "I would prefer not to"
> "But why?"
> "At present I prefer to give no answer."

And then for the rest of the story, the mysterious Bartleby only repeats "I would prefer not to" to his boss and colleagues and ceases working at all. Later he refuses to leave the office building and becomes a trouble for the narrator. Alexander Cooke reads Deleuze's reading of the story, "Bartleby does not refuse to do anything. If Bartleby had said 'I will not," his act of resistance would have merely negated the law. Having negated in relation to the law, this transgression would have perfectly fulfilled the law's function" (Odell 2019: 71). Odell finds Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" "a real refusal" because it "refuses the terms of the question itself" (2019: 91).

Another Bartleby-like character could be found in Mike Judge's black comedy *Office Space* (1999), a movie that ridicules the modern workplace culture in a typical mid-to-late-1990s software company. The main character Peter Gibbons is a drone who abominates the tedious job and nagging bosses

who destroy his self-esteem. He lives a life without interiority, and he works merely for the purpose to pay the bill and follow the majority and social propriety. His monotonous life has radically changed after his visit to a hypnotist. He suddenly dares to do nothing. When asked what he is doing, he replied with joy, "I did nothing. I did absolutely nothing. And it was everything I thought it could be!" *Office Space* shows a romanticized version of inaction, and Peter gets to live a life he dreams about under hypnosis—spending time with his new girlfriend Joanna (Jennifer Aniston) and getting rid of his boring work and demanding boss. Like the old lawyer in the Bartleby story, Peter's annoying boss Bill Lundbergh, who finds it reasonable to ask his employees to come to office on Saturdays and Sundays, is caught off guard when his demands are rejected bluntly. Peter could be seen as a modern and comic version of Bartleby in the 20th century, and he is more fortunate than his predecessor. While Bartleby dies in jail, Peter is promoted in the company, and even gets away from embezzlement. In the end we see Peter discovers a new sense of fulfillment in his new construction job.

Sometimes doing nothing is the most radical form of rebellion. For Slavoj Žižek, Bartleby's story tells us how to cope with the geopolitical and economic deadline, capital realism. In his own words, "Better to do nothing than to engage in localised acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run more smoothly (acts like providing space for the multitude of new subjectivities, and so on). The threat today is not passivity but pseudo-activity, the urge to 'be active,' to 'participate,' to mask the Nothingness of what goes on" (Žižek 2006: 334). He foregrounds the value of doing nothing: "Sometimes doing nothing is the most violent thing to do" (Žižek 2008: 217).

For Gilles Deleuze, Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" forms a "formula." In his own words,

> Bartleby is neither a metaphor for the writer nor the symbol of anything whatsoever. It is a violently comical text, and the comical is always literal. It is like the novels of Kleist, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, or Beckett, with which it forms a subterranean and prestigious lineage. It means only what it says, literally. And what it says and repeats is I would prefer not to. This is the formula of its glory, which every loving reader repeats in turn. (Deleuze 1997: 68)

Referring to Blanchot, Deleuze believes that Bartleby reflects on "pure patient passivity" and he is living in state of "being as being, and nothing more. He is urged to say yes or no. But if he said no (to collating, running errands...), or if he said yes (to copying), he would quickly be defeated and judged useless, and

would not survive. He can survive only by whirling in a suspense that keeps everyone at a distance" (Deleuze 1997: 71).

In an interview with *Le Monde*, Roland Barthes famously advocated for "daring to be lazy," championing a "glorious" form of idleness that is closely linked to freedom. However, Pierre Saint-Amand suggests that Barthes' version of laziness is actually a form of procrastination. He argues, "His resistance is in fact more a reflex of procrastination, of diversion: it consists of constantly deferring, of putting off until tomorrow what is to be done" (Saint-Amand 2001: 519). Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman's ideas, Saint-Amand contends that this procrastination is not passive but an active form of resistance—a way to exert control over life's events by disrupting their programmed flow and delaying the inevitable.

My Year of Rest and Relaxation (2018)

Ottessa Moshfegh's 2018 novel *The Year of Rest and Relaxation* tells a story about an unnamed narrator who decides to do nothing and sleep for a year. As an American writer of Croatian and Iranian descent, Ottessa Moshfegh is one of the most successful and provocative novelists in the 21st century Anglophone literature. Jia Tolentino describes her as "easily the most interesting contemporary American writer on the subject of being alive when being alive feels terrible." She has published the novella *McGlue* (2014), her first novel *Eileen* (2015), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award; a collection of 14 short stories *Homesick for Another World* (2017). *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), a peculiar story about profound lassitude and ennui, hit the New York Time best seller, and Buzzread, the Washington Post and NPR have named it a best book of year. It is said that there is a film adaptation in the works. She published her next novel *Death in Her Hands* in 2020, which landed a major deal ($500,000 or more).

We all have a day like this: waking up reluctantly, and feeling like staying in bed the whole day, ordering pizzas, doing nothing, shutting out the entire world. The narrator in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* feels exactly this way, the only difference is that she pulls off to extend this day to almost a year. As a beautiful, rich, and young woman, the narrator drugs herself to sleep to lose track of time for a year. Before she engaged in this project, she has a decent life: she is Columbia-educated, owing an apartment with doormen in the Upper East side, has a job in a Chelsea art gallery, has an on-and-off relationship with a guy called Trevor, hangs out with her friend Rexa—she

frequently thinks about how to end their relationship. One day, it is as if she decides to say Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" to the whole world, she becomes desperate to take a sabbatical from her life, "I had started 'hibernating' as best I could in mid-June of 2000. I was twenty-six years old. I watched summer die and autumn turn cold and gray through a broken slat in the blinds. My muscles withered" (Moshfegh 2018: 3). She detaches herself from the hustle and bustle of the urban life outside,

> Things were happening in New York City—they always are—but none of it affected me. This was the beauty of sleep—reality detached itself and appeared in my mind as casually as a movie or a dream. It was easy to ignore things that didn't concern me. Subway workers went on strike. A hurricane came and went. It didn't matter. Extraterrestrials could have invaded, locusts could have swarmed, and I would have noted it, but I wouldn't have worried. (Moshfegh 2018: 4)

The narrator remains vague about why she begins her project with a "goal of doing nothing" (2018: 186) "I can't point to any one event that resulted in my decision to go into narcotic-induced hibernation. Initially, I just wanted some downers to drown out my thoughts and judgments, since the constant barrage made it hard not to have everyone and everything. I thought life would be more tolerable if my brain were slower to condemn the word around me" (2018: 17-18). At work, she would nap in the supply closet during lunch break,

> I went straight into black emptiness, an infinite space of nothingness. I was neither scared nor elated in that space. I had no visions. I had no ideas. If I had a distinct thought, I would hear it, and the sound of it would echo and echo until it got absorbed by the darkness and disappeared. There was no response necessary. No insane conversation with myself. It was peaceful… There was no work to do, nothing I had to counteract or compensate for because there was nothing at all, period. And yet I was aware of the nothingness. I was awake in the sleep, somehow. I felt good. Almost happy. (Moshfegh 2018: 39-40)

Sleep becomes irresistible, and literally the only thing she wants, "Oh, sleep. Nothing else could ever bring me such pleasure, such freedom, the power to feel and move and think and imagine, safe from the miseries of my waking consciousness" (2018: 46). It is her belief that a whole year of rest and relaxation would make her awake "renewed, reborn." She believes that "I would be a whole new person, every one of my cells regenerated enough times that the

old cells were just distant, foggy memories. My past life would be but a dream, and I could start over without regret, bolstered by the bliss and serenity that I would have accumulated in my year of rest and relaxation" (2018: 51). The NPR review of this book calls the novel "a rest-oration drama" and the narrator's one year hibernation a "self-preservational" project.

With her privilege and money and house she inherited, the narrator could be criticized as apathy. It is indeed a luxury to afford to reject the whole world without acknowledging the other people's existence or worrying about how to pay bills. Yet her year of rest and relaxation shows that she has a very weak social connection and lacks meaningful personal relationship. She is orphaned, losing her parents—her scientist father to cancer and her alcoholic mother to suicide, and sadly their deaths came only six weeks apart. What saddens the narrator more, ironically, is how aloof and distant they were when her parents were alive, "I'd feel sorry for myself, not because I missed my parents, but because there was nothing they could have given me if they'd lived, they weren't my friends. They didn't comfort me or give me good advice. They weren't people I wanted to talk to. They barely knew me."

The review in *Slate* points out that the narrator is fed up with "unrequited love" in her life, which is obvious in her relationship with her late parents, her obsession with her ex who no longer wants to talk to her, and her unkindness to her friend Rexa who claims that she would love her no matter what happens. *The Guardian* review suggests that the narrator's project is "an organised effacement of the self," for "she's already been made abject and partially erased by everyone she knows." Her mother used Valium to keep her asleep as a baby, her father simply ignored her, even their deaths were "acts of absent-minded rejection."

In her meager waking hours, she would zone out in front of Whoopi Goldberg or Harrison Ford movies, make reluctant but necessary trips to do grocery shopping, or pick up pills at pharmacy. She also has monthly appointments with Dr. Tuttle, an incompetent shrink who hands out pills like candies, and she has to deal with her friend Reva's occasional uninvited visits. Sometimes she wakes up and tests if something has changed inside her, "I decided I would test myself to see what was left of my emotions, what kind of shape I was in after so much sleep. My hope as that I'd healed enough over half a year's hibernation, I'd become immune to painful memories. So I thought back to my father's death again. I had been very emotional when it happened. I figured any tears I still had left to cry might be about him…" (Moshfegh 2018: 137-38). Her project of doing nothing seemed to work, "The memory should

have rustled up some grief in me. It should have reignited the coals of woe. But it didn't…, I felt almost nothing" (2018: 140).

Later in her hibernation project, she realizes that one side effect of Infermiterol, one fictional drug, is three-day blackouts, during which she functions normally without any memories. She is not only sleep-walking, she is "sleep-living." She would call her ex, going clubbing, scheduling waxing and spa sessions, going shopping spree, and sexting with strangers online. In order to prevent herself from doing a lot of normal stuff during her sleep, which is against her "goal of doing nothing" (2018: 186), she realizes that she "needed to be locked up (2018: 254). She puts her phone in Tupperware and duct-tapes it shut, and she changes her lock on her front door so she can ask an acquaintance to lock her in. With these pre-arrangements, the narrator continues to sleep, only waking up every three days to eat. It seems to be a project of "purging"—getting rid of the deadwood of her old self in order to become a new one. Miraculously, it begins to work, "I could feel the certainty of a reality leeching out of me like calcium from a bone. I was starving my mind into obliqueness. I felt less and less" (2018: 270).

Toward the end of her one year project, she comes to once and is crying in the dark, "I could hear myself gasp and whimper. I focused on the sound and then the universe narrowed into a fine line, and that felt better because there was a clearer trajectory, so I traveled more peacefully through outer space, listening to the rhythm of my respiration, each breath an echo of the breath before, softer and softer, until I was far enough away that there was no sound, there was no movement. There was no need for reassurance or directionality because I was nowhere, doing nothing. I was nothing. I was gone" (2018: 276). She claims, "On June 1, 2001. I came to in a cross-legged seated position on the living room floor. I was alive" (2018: 276).

The narrator has another significant "I would prefer not to" moment when she is appreciating works of art. After she ends her year of rest and relaxation, one day she goes to Mets, drawn by a work of art, she stands too close. One staff tells her to "Step back, please" "Step away!" at that precise moment, the narrator feels an epiphany—instead of stepping away as requested, she touches the frame and then even the canvas,

> The notion of my future suddenly snapped into focus: it didn't exist yet. I was making it, stranding there, breathing, fixing the air around my body with

> stillness, trying to capture something—a thought, I guess—as though such a thing were possible, as though I believed in the delusion described in those paintings—that time could be contained, held captive. I didn't know what was true. So I did not step back. Instead, I put my hand out. I touched the frame of the painting. And then I placed my whole palm on the dry, rumbling surface of the canvas, simply to prove to myself that there was no God stalking my soul. Time was not immemorial. Things were just *things*. (Moshfegh 2018: 286-87)

She does not feel unsettled, "That was it. I was free" (2018: 287), as if her year of rest and relaxation, her year of doing nothing is officially a success. "My sleep had worked. I was soft and calm and felt things. This was good. This was my life now. I could survive without the house… I could move on" (2018: 288). Little does she know that her significant moment of rebirth, ironically, happens in early September in 2001. It is not a coincidence that the author chooses to let her self-drugged sleeping beauty to wake up in 2001—we readers know that she will witness the day that changed the world—September 11th 2001 soon. Would she prefer to waking up to a different time? After one-year long sleep, she is going to witness a horrifying scene that makes the reality more like a dream.

As *The Financial Times* aptly notes, Moshfegh's novel can be seen as "the boldest literary statement of passive resistance since Herman Melville's scrivener famously declared 'I would prefer not to.'" However, despite the striking similarities, a more detailed examination of the two characters' expressions of "I would prefer not to" reveals both shared and divergent elements in their passive resistance. The question arises: What is the significance of this philosophy of non-engagement? Is it a coping mechanism, a form of escape, or something more profound—a conscious rejection of the world and its demands?

At first glance, the social status, identity, and circumstances of Bartleby's eponymous character and Moshfegh's unnamed narrator could not be more different. Bartleby is a "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn" (6) scrivener in a lowly office on Wall Street, a man whose only purpose seems to be the mind-numbing task of copying documents. In contrast, the narrator of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is a privileged, attractive 26-year-old woman, living in wealth and luxury, with "tall and thin and blond and pretty and young" (Moshfegh 2018: 27) as her defining traits. Bartleby lives in poverty and obscurity, while Moshfegh's narrator is cocooned in comfort and excess. The narratives are also told from different points of view: Melville's story is

framed through the eyes of Bartleby's employer, creating an air of mystery around the character until his tragic end, while Moshfegh's novel is presented as a first-person account, offering intimate insight into the narrator's mind.

Yet despite these differences, both characters share a unique stance toward life. They both live in Manhattan—albeit 150 years apart—and choose to reject the world around them in their own ways. Bartleby's passive resistance is an attempt to disengage from the work of life, while Moshfegh's narrator takes a more extreme approach by isolating herself entirely, seeking solace in "sleep-living" as a form of withdrawal from the pressures of modern existence. Both characters are indifferent to the events and people around them, choosing to ignore the hustle of Wall Street and the superficiality of the Upper East Side. By the end of their respective stories, both characters are imprisoned—Bartleby in a literal jail, and the narrator in a self-imposed "sleeping prison" (Moshfegh 2018: 263), a confinement to her own inaction and numbness.

Justin Taylor observes that Moshfegh's narrator attempts something that Bartleby never truly manages: an elevated, transcendent state of existence. Taylor writes, "The best way to win a rigged game is to refuse to play it, and so the narrator's narcissistic nihilism has the dignity of refusal on a grand scale. It is only her need to be human, to be part of a world—even a vacuous and exploitative world—that keeps her from achieving the full transcendence of a Bartleby. This failure is something we should all be able to empathize with..." (Moshfegh 2018: 247). The narrator's realization that she must lock herself away to avoid "sleep-living" seems to deviate from the true freedom she seeks—a complete detachment from the chaotic demands of social media, technology, and societal expectations. Does her story, then, suggest that doing nothing might be the only way to truly begin living? Or does her passive resistance ultimately fail in its attempt to break free from the world it seeks to escape?

Conclusions

Moshfegh's narrator's journey toward inactivity can also be read as a nod to the ancient philosopher Diogenes, whose rejection of societal norms and materialism was equally radical. Like Diogenes, the narrator's embrace of doing nothing highlights the absurdity of modern life, where the pressure to be constantly busy and productive often overwhelms the desire for quiet reflection. This is reflected in her admiration for Whoopi Goldberg, whom she sees as a hero for her acceptance of life's absurdity. "Whenever she appeared on-screen, I sensed she was laughing at the whole production… Wherever she went,

everything around her became a parody of itself, gauche and ridiculous. That was a comfort to see. Thank God for Whoopi. Nothing was sacred. Whoopi was proof" (Moshfegh 2018: 196). The narrator finds comfort in Goldberg's ability to exist outside the confines of societal expectation, a comfort that mirrors the way readers of Melville and Moshfegh might also find solace in characters who reject the demands of the world, repeating "I would prefer not to." This act of refusal, this resistance to participate in the prescribed rhythms of life, becomes a powerful form of defiance—a critique of the forces that demand our constant engagement and productivity, even at the cost of our humanity.

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