‘I’d Prefer Not To’. Bartleby and the Excesses of Interpretation

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This paper engages with Herman Melville’s short story Bartleby the Scrivener, as well as contemporary discussions thereof, so as to consider a peculiar concept of excess suggested to us by its main character. Our discussion focuses upon three of the most prominent contemporary Bartlebys: ‘The Politicized Bartleby’ of Slavoj Zizek, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri; ‘The Originary Bartleby’ of Gilles Deleuze; and ‘The Whatever Bartleby’ of Giorgio Agamben. On the basis of these interpretations we derive a concept of excess as the residual surplus of any categorical interpretation, the yet to be accounted for, the not yet explained, the un-interpretable, the indeterminate, the always yet to arrive, precisely that which cannot be captured, held onto nor put in place. This particular discussion of Bartleby is connected to a more general discussion of a management and organization studies that has become increasingly reliant upon literary texts. On this topic, we pass a not altogether optimistic commentary, itself informed by the excessive demand of adequately interpreting Bartleby.

Key words: Bartleby; Interpretation; Fiction; Literature; Excess

INTRODUCTION

Even a cursory glance over the work of theorists such as Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthou (1994), Czarniawska (1999), Knights and Willmott (1999), Smith et al. (2001) and Rhodes (2001), alongside the work of narrative analysts such as Boje (2000) and Gabriel (2000, 2004), quickly brings one to the realisation that the case for fiction has already been well made within the realm of management and organization studies. As Christian de Cock (2000: 589) points out, there is no longer any ‘special originality’ to be claimed by contemporary organisation theorists drawing upon fictional resources. Novelty shunned in this regard, here we are nonetheless arguing why Melville’s Bartleby the Scrivener might be of interest to scholars of organization! Aren’t we offering yet another eulogy to a fictionally sensitized organization studies? Isn’t this just another case of colleagues getting together in order to publish a paper about something they like? Such comments may well be raised but we would prefer not to consider our contribution in this regard!

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doesn’t lend itself to much discussion. For this reason we would like you to consider the latter along with us during the course of the paper. As we will go on to show, perhaps one of the strongest tendencies within Melville/Bartleby scholarship is to read the story through a particular ‘lens’ or ‘perspective’, thereby unravelling the ‘truth’ of the text from this or that point of view. In this regard an idea is taken to Bartleby, filtered through, and shown to be the case. But after a while Bartleby didn’t even do his own job, why should he be expected to fulfil the numerous expectations and obligations imposed upon him by others?

Bartleby’s is a characteristically enigmatic tale—the last word on him is not easily had. There have been numerous attempts to get to the ‘truth’ of what Bartleby is about, many efforts to get to the heart of who he really is. Yet despite such an excess of interpretations, Bartleby somehow exceeds interpretation. There always seems to be more to Bartleby, the many attempts to grasp him never quite manage to do so (Hillis Miller, 1990). Such ‘failures’ of interpretation are interesting in themselves. They are compelling from the point of view of a management and organisation studies engaged in a programme of making the case for fiction. Why compelling? Well, we are often told how the ‘facts’ of organisation theory are themselves ‘fictions’ of a sort, directed in this regard towards motifs such as ‘blurred boundaries’, ‘inter-textuality’ and ‘postmodernism’ (e.g., Phillips, 1995). We are thereby told a story of how the use of fiction can facilitate us in our study of organization(s). But this story is told almost entirely at the expense of another story which would emphasize how the use of fiction might actually serve to impede organization studies. By this other story we do not mean the argument which attempts to secure an absolute separation between the realms of fact and fiction. The impediment we have in mind is rather a project that would take seriously the failures of interpretation in the face of fiction. What is to be done when there is no discernable moral to be taken from the fictions deemed relevant to management and organisation studies? What happens when the fictions we turn to in order to make sense of the organized world end up further confusing it? What if Bartleby told us nothing discernible about management and organisation, what then of the organization studies argument for the relevance of fiction? This for us is a compelling question.

This paper is best understood as a commentary upon what, if anything, management and organization studies can expect from fiction. Our commentary is developed with recourse to a discussion of the many ways in which the story of Bartleby has been interpreted. In this regard we focus upon three of the most prominent contemporary Bartlebys: ‘The Politicized Bartleby’ of Slavoj Zizek, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri; ‘The Originary Bartleby’ of Gilles Deleuze; and ‘The Whatever Bartleby’ of Giorgio Agamben. We link the inherent difficulties of Bartleby interpretation to a two-pronged concept of excess. On the one hand, the quality of excess as exemplified within the story itself, the fact that whatever Bartleby means always manages to exceed whatever is written about him. On the other hand, the quantitative excesses of Bartleby interpretation, a perhaps inevitable consequence of Bartleby’s excessive qualities. That Bartleby cannot be properly interpreted leads to more and more interpretations of Bartleby, hence, Bartleby and the Excesses of Interpretation. We conclude by connecting our particular discussion of Bartleby and interpretation to a more general discussion of the challenge represented by a management and organization studies making the apparently innocent turn towards fiction.

WHY BARTLEBY?

Melville said that a novel includes an infinite number of interesting characters but just one original Figure like the single sun of a constellation of a universe, like the beginning of things, or like the beam of light that draws a hidden universe out of the shadow: hence Captain Ahab, or Bartleby. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 65–6)
Bartleby is not everyman; his particularity is such that we cannot really think of any likeness that might prepare us for him or him for us. Bartleby is ‘one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable’ (Melville, 1853/1967: 59). Bartleby is like Bartleby, a literary enigma and a treasure trove of attempted interpretations. In 1981, William Burling recognised over one hundred and seventy five articles written on or about Bartleby since 1922 (Burling, 1981: 54), more than 175 articles devoted to studying this strangely wonderful character. A quarter of a century on and Bartleby continues to challenge, puzzle, confuse, provoke and amaze those that encounter him. The very fact that so many have made such efforts to twist, turn, bend and break him into all manner of shapes and sizes is in itself interesting, his newly found forms are at times amusing. Be it the Christlike or Godlike Bartleby (Fiene, 1970; Cervo, 1972), Bartleby the Pessimist (Stempel and Stillians, 1972), Bartleby the Autistic (Sullivan, 1976), Bartleby the Melancholic (Wright, 1970), Bartleby the Socratic (Furlani, 1997) even Bartleby the Heideggerian anti-hero (Sundarajan, 1999), his strangeness is surpassed only by the strangeness of the manner in which he has been interpreted. The world of Bartleby is indeed a bizarre one yet, uncannily, it is a world that we somehow identify and recognise nonetheless. The image of a lonely, middle-aged clerk, ‘pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn’ (Melville, 1853/1967: 66), whiling away his life enclosed within the four walls of an office block, hardly speaking to his colleagues, hardly recognizing his boss and never smiling is indeed one that we can manage and account for with various pre-formatted categories. Knowing Bartleby in this way, he can be generalized and put in a place where we need not worry about him anymore.

But ours is not a project pursuing the essence of Bartleby, one that seeks to work things out, to determine Identities or to put beings into what we insist upon being their proper place. Bartleby would not comply with such an approach; he would most likely prefer not to comply. As with any truly brilliant literary character, Bartleby somehow defies definition; we cannot seek to pin him down, ascribe a definitive meaning to him nor force him into a form. It is not for us, nor anybody else, to fill him with an essence or a defined existence since he always overcomes these in his ‘being-able’ (Agamben, 1993). Deleuze (1998: 82–3) considers Bartleby an ‘original’ that ‘exceeds any explicable form’; he ‘escape[s] knowledge’ and ‘def[ies] psychology’. The last thing we can hope for is to speak of Bartleby in terms of ‘this’ or ‘that’ because, quite simply, ‘this’ and ‘that’ are not receptacles capable of capturing the task he sets for them.

There is always something more with Bartleby, something extra, something that exceeds this or that thematization. Yes, Bartleby is an office worker but he is not simply any office worker. Yes, Bartleby is the silent type but he is not just the silent type. Yes, Bartleby is an employee that stops working but he is not only an employee that stops working. It is precisely this not to be exhausted nature of Bartleby, his not to be understood-ness, his always more than-ness, his excessiveness, that is to say the excess that he still somehow is, that intrigues so many. Indeed, as we will go on to show, it is precisely in terms of this excessiveness, this exceeding of categories, that much of the recent theorization of Bartleby has been done. It is the existence of a bountiful crop of scholarship, criticism and interpretation that is for us an interesting phenomenon—one which we would like to draw consequences from in the face of the widely pronounced promise of a fictionally sensitized management and organization studies.

THE POLITICIZED BARTLEBY

I called to him, rapidly stating what it was I wanted him to do—namely, to examine a small paper with me. Imagine my surprise, nay, my consternation, when, without moving from his privacy, Bartleby, in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, ‘I would prefer not to.’
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 possibly assume; but in quite as clear a one came the previous reply, ‘I would prefer not to.’

‘Prefer not to,’ echoed I, rising high in 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, 1853/1967: 68)

A variety of authors have approached Bartleby as a political representative, a representative of the working classes, of organization man. Their interest in the story and in Bartleby’s character is primarily of a political nature. In principle there is nothing to be said against approaching a literary work with such political intent. Literature has always been an important source of inspiration in the imagination of resistance and politics. In this regard, for authors such as Barnett (1974), Bartleby’s condition reflects that of the working class at large, his act mirrored the futility of any individual attempts to escape its plight. In this sense, Bartleby was seen to encapsulate the more general position of the contemporary alienated worker.

In opposition to Barnett, Hardt and Negri read much possibility into the case of Bartleby. He appears at a pivotal moment of Empire, bridging the analysis of Empire to the discussion of the possibility of counter-Empire. For Hardt and Negri (2000: 203–4), ‘Melville’s character fits in with a long tradition of the refusal of work’, and that the mystery of the story lies in the ‘absoluteness of the refusal’. Bartleby is seen to take refusal to the extreme, declining ‘passively and absolutely’ and in such a ‘calm and serene’ way that it becomes disarming (ibid.: 203). Bartleby is here said to represent a ‘man without qualities’, ‘pure passivity’, ‘generic being, being as such’, and ‘naked being’ (ibid.). But whilst Bartleby’s act of refusal is considered paramount, it is written only as the beginning of a liberatory politics. Refusal brings relief from authority but refusal itself is empty: Bartleby’s ‘solitary lines of flight’, Hardt and Negri (ibid.: 204) argue, amount to a kind of social suicide. A ‘project that goes well beyond refusal’ is hence proposed, based upon the insistence that ‘we need also to construct a new mode of life and a new community’ (ibid.).

So in Empire, Bartleby is evicted from a 1840s’ Wall Street office and thrown onto the streets of Seattle and Genoa of more recent years. Upon these streets, Bartleby becomes burdened with the responsibility of acting as a model for the political act of refusal as such, a model deemed the beginning of a new community. Hardt and Negri’s interest in the story, and in Bartleby’s character, is primarily political. Their means of interpretation is primarily guided by the question of how Bartleby can contribute towards their project, itself already largely conceived. But is Bartleby what Hardt and Negri want him to be? Can we reduce Bartleby’s act to that of refusal? Certainly Bartleby suggests that we are never completely determined by a supposedly total system. This is the simple but undeniable power of work refusal for Hardt and Negri, the power of a worker to affirm that he or she is not simply, only and always a worker. For sure, a consequence of Bartleby’s famous motto is a wide range of what initially seem to be refusals. The extra-vocational tasks of examining small papers to the contracted obligations as scrivener are all roles Bartleby eventually does not fulfill. But such apparent refusals of work are consequential to, rather than intended within the ‘I would prefer not to’. Bartleby does not simply refuse and leave things at that, for, in fact, he does not actually refuse anything at all. There is no decision to refuse, no affirmation of refusal as such and there is certainly no decision on the side of refusal. His practice exceeds the category of refusal. Consider the following:

‘Why do you refuse?’ ‘I would prefer not to.’ With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously from my presence. But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me. (Melville, 1853/1967: 69, emphasis in original)
Or:

Bartleby was never, on any account, to be dispatched on the most trivial errand of any sort; and that even if entreated to take upon him such a matter, it was generally understood that he would ‘prefer not to’—in other words, that he would refuse point-blank. (ibid.: 74)

That Bartleby does not actually refuse work is more or less evident from the first excerpt. In the second excerpt things are a little more complex: negative preference seems to have been equated with refusal, Bartleby’s stating ‘I would prefer not’ is taken to mean the same thing as his refusing of work (‘in other words’). Yet this is not the case for it is the lawyer (and narrator) and not Bartleby, that has made this connection. The connection between refusal and preference is made on behalf of Bartleby, not by him. The lawyer draws consequences from Bartleby’s way of being for the sake of his own, this consequence is drawn by inference, not once is it observed or demonstrated to have been the case. Bartleby does not once actually refuse his obligations; he merely states that he would prefer not to fulfill them and his boss somehow respects his preference, albeit wholly perplexed thereby. Bartleby does not refuse work at all, he is taken to be a refuser of work yet not once does he actually do so. This is the error of the lawyer in as much as it is the error of Hardt and Negri, to map onto Bartleby the idea of work refusal. In the absence of Bartleby asserting his own intentions or inclinations, his interpreters have been forced to make speculations in this regard. Bartleby does not give his own opinion nor affirm his own desire, he merely states that he prefers not to. Hence Bartleby’s services have not been secured by the cause of work refusal; such a manner of attempting to account for him has failed to do so. Bartleby exceeds the category of refusal.

Slavoj Zizek (2006b, 2006a) also attempts to politically commit Bartleby, albeit apart from the category of work refusal. Zizek sees in Bartleby a figure of the passive-aggressive who embraces a certain kind of violence (in contrast to futile violence). He hence sees in Bartleby a procedure which cannot be subsumed by ‘the system’. Zizek suggests that this entails a move ‘from the politics of ‘resistance or ‘protestation,’ which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation’, one which he terms a ‘gesture of subtraction’ (Zizek, 2006b: 381–2). Like Hardt and Negri, Zizek is concerned with the construction of a new social order not to be corrupted. However, Zizek underlines two points of stark contrast between his Bartleby and the Bartleby of Hardt and Negri. First of all, Zizek’s Bartleby’s ‘withdrawal’ is not to be likened to the ‘being-against Empire’ of Hardt and Negri (2000: 210); rather, it involves a withdrawal from ‘all the forms of resisting which help the system to reproduce itself by ensuring our participation in it’ (Zizek, 2006b: 383). The story of Bartleby, for Zizek, is not about refusal or resistance; rather it is about a subtraction which also denies contemporary forms of pseudo-resistance. Zizek warns us against such pseudo-activity, and suggests, following Alain Badiou, that it might be better to do nothing than to ‘engage in localized acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run more smoothly’ (ibid.: 334). He thus proposes ‘Bartleby politics’ in opposition to such futile acts:

(Perhaps we should assert this attitude of passive aggression as a proper radical political gesture, in contrast to aggressive passivity, the standard ‘interpassive’ mode of our participation in socio-ideological life in which we are active all the time in order to make sure that nothing will happen, that nothing will really change. In such a constellation, the first truly critical (‘aggressive,’ violent) step is to withdraw into passivity, to refuse to participate—Bartleby’s ‘I would prefer not to’ is the necessary first step which, as it were, clears the ground, opens up the place, for true activity, for an act that will actually change the coordinates of the constellation. (ibid.: 342)

The second distinction Zizek makes between his Bartleby and that of Hardt and Negri is in terms of the political significance given to the ‘I would prefer not to’ itself. For Zizek, Bartleby’s motto is not simply a first act from which we then move on to construct a new community; rather, Zizek considers it to be ‘the underlying principle that sustains the entire movement: far from ‘overcoming’ it, the subsequent work of construction, rather, gives body
to it’ (ibid.: 382). It is perhaps worth very briefly mentioning how this discussion figures within Zizek’s work more generally. Zizek introduces Bartleby in part three of the recently published *The Parallax View*. Zizek is here concerned with finding a mode of resistance to ‘the system’ not easily subsumed and corrupted by the same. At a very basic level, Zizek always returns to the question of the Russian revolution, and to Stalin: how can one sustain a revolution? How can one construct a social order that does not lead to totalitarianism? Zizek rejects the liberalist answer of the transparent law and public sphere since, as he has argued so many times, the law always depends on an obscene superego supplement in order to function. For him there will always be ideology and so the task is one of managing this gap between the law and ideology, of finding a social order that does not succumb to the twin ideologies of liberalism and totalitarianism. It is during a revolution proper that the ideological knot is untied, hence the general theme of the parallax gap, and the problematic of the difference between the law and its obscene supplement. Bartleby is recruited by Zizek to sustain just such a gap:

The difference between Bartleby’s gesture of withdrawal and the formation of a new order is—again, and for the last time—that of parallax: the very frantic and engaged activity of constructing a new order is sustained by an underlying ‘I would prefer not to’ which forever reverberates in it…. That is to say: in a ‘revolutionary situation,’ what, exactly, happens to the gap between the public Law and its obscene superego supplement? It is not that, in a kind of metaphysical unity, the gap is simply abolished, that we obtain only a public regulation of social life, deprived of any hidden obscene supplement. *The gap remains*, but reduced to a structural minimum: to the ‘pure’ difference between the set of social regulations and the void of their absence. In other words, Bartleby’s gesture is what remains of the supplement to the Law when its place is emptied of all its obscene superego content. (Zizek, 2006b: 382, emphasis in original)

Bartleby, then, is the answer to the Russian Revolution, the answer to Stalin, and the answer to the question of radical politics. Bartleby and his utterance are thus placed by Zizek into a particular theoretico-political constellation, and interpreted accordingly. Read in this manner, Bartleby is an always already political phenomenon, another name on the petition, another supporter of the cause. Bartleby matters to Zizek in as much as Bartleby can be made to say something of the political parallax. Such an approach certainly has its theoretical and strategic merits. Such an interpretation also serves a very reductive purpose: to render Bartleby as a political spokesperson mouthing the mantras of a necessarily limited script. The operation upon Bartleby is one of foreclosure—a foreclosure certainly effectuated for political reasons, which might be welcome, but a foreclosure nonetheless. Bartleby is not only a spokesperson for Zizek’s politics, he exceeds such a role, he cannot only be considered in this regard.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that there is not a political engagement to be had with Bartleby, nor do we in any way wish to discourage any and every attempt at a Bartlebian politics. Our point is rather than such a project has to carefully work through Bartleby, taking seriously the many difficulties and complexities of appropriating the story rather than opting for the simpler exercise of covering them over. Otherwise, any political lesson drawn will be bound to answer towards a residual excess that can be neither contained nor channeled. Our point is that when Bartleby is cast within a particular political role, he will show himself to exceed that role. If the quest is for a Bartlebian politics, then the approach must be made from the specificities of Bartleby towards a general politics rather than from a specific politics towards the same politics through a generalization of Bartleby. Put more simply, if the concern is a Bartlebian politics then this can only emerge from Bartleby informing a politics rather than a politics formalizing Bartleby.

**THE ORIGINARY BARTLEBY**

In contrast to the approach that attempts to render Bartleby in a certain manner, we find a wholly distinct approach to Bartleby within the work of Agamben (1993, 1999) and Deleuze
(1998). Their concern is to engage Bartleby as a singular, as an original. Even at a very basic level, we find in their work a much closer engagement with the story itself, much more of a concern to grapple with the task of literary interpretation rather than that of political gesticulation. Bartleby is still considered within particular philosophical constellations but here we find accounts of his excessiveness, accounts that express a degree of hostility towards the sort of campaign recruitment methodologies of interpretation exemplified by Hardt and Negri as well as by Zizek.

The problem of enlisting Bartleby, Deleuze (1998: 73) argues, is that he does not fulfill the straightforward social role of the rebel or insurrectionary. Agamben (1999: 256) states very explicitly that ‘Bartleby does not consent, but neither does he simply refuse to do what is asked of him; nothing is farther from him than the heroic pathos of negation’. Deleuze (1998: 74) suggests that Bartleby is a man without particularities who ‘is too smooth for anyone to be able to hang any particularity on him’; again suggesting that imposing a certain role, revolutionary or other, on Bartleby will prove futile. Bartleby as an original, Deleuze contends (ibid: 82–3), ‘is a powerful, solitary Figure that exceeds any explicable form: it projects flamboyant traits of expression that mark the stubbornness of a thought without image, a question without response, an extreme and nonrational logic’. How is such a figure to become a leader of a revolution? Particularly, if, as Agamben (1999: 254–5) argues, Bartleby’s potentiality ‘exceeds will (his own and that of others) at every point’?

If it is the singular Bartleby we seek to understand then we are required to make our approach centrifugally, starting with a problem not yet solved nor even properly posed, a singular world emanating outwards, rather than centripetally, starting with that which has already been said and worked out, along a procedure that converges at a particular point where politics and Bartleby are shown to be one in the same. The particular force of the story lies not in its generality—Bartleby the representative of the alienated masses—but in its originality. We need to engage Bartleby as singular, as original, before we can even contemplate the political moment. As Deleuze says:

Originals are beings of Primary Nature, but they are inseparable from the world or from secondary nature, where they exert their effect: they reveal its emptiness, the imperfection of its laws, the mediocrity of particular creatures…. The original, says Melville, is not subject to the influence of his milieu; on the contrary, he throws a livid white light on his surroundings, much like the light that ‘accompanies the beginning of things in Genesis’. (Deleuze, 1998: 83)

Rather than starting with a politics and forcing Bartleby to puppet the same, let us instead trace Deleuze’s and Agamben’s interpretations of Bartleby’s own logic. As Jacques Ranciere argues, for Deleuze the question of reading neither involves simply mapping the Aristotelian plot of the story, nor of deciphering the symbolism of the story. Instead, literature is to be considered a ‘material power that produces material bodies’ (Ranciere, 2004: 153), and first and foremost it is a performance. Therefore, ‘Bartleby is not the story of the quirks and misfortunes of a poor clerk. Nor is it a symbol for the human condition. It is a formula, a performance’ (ibid: 146). The power of literature hence ‘finds its source in that zone of indeterminacy where former individuations are undone, where the eternal dance of atoms composes new figures and intensities every moment’, and this power takes hold ‘just where the mind becomes disorganized, where its world splits, where thought bursts into atoms that are in unity with atoms of matter’ (ibid: 149). Let us, thus, start with Bartleby and the way in which he is approached by Deleuze and Agamben.

Whilst the functioning of the office requires an all-encompassing subscription to role-based assumptions (‘I command, you obey’), Bartleby immediately defies this logic of assumptions (Melville, 1853/1967: 85), putting in its place the logic of preference (ibid). Bartleby tears the fabric of the social by highlighting how its apparent cohesiveness is made possible only by a happily contingent labour process; he reveals to us the fragility of all
subordinative relationships. Bartleby reveals the hierarchy that drives his relationship with/ subordination to his supervisor neither by pointing a finger at it nor by protesting against it but instead, by not affording it with any level of legitimacy whatsoever. Yet even this interpretation misses the point for it implies that Bartleby makes some sort of decision and this is simply not the case. There is no decision made by Bartleby because to make a decision he would have first of all had to recognise decision’s necessity — this he quite simply does not do. Bartleby exceeds his identity of the subordinate by not being subordinated, by not recognising that in the particular context within which he finds himself, he is supposed to exist for another. In not acting in accordance with his role as subordinate, his boss, the lawyer, is himself thrown into the turmoil of confusion. There is no set habit, practice or code of conduct that indicates how ‘the logic of preference’ (Deleuze, 1998: 73–4) should best be dealt with. The seeds of the Bartlebian epidemic are sown; his formula infects those that encounter it; we notice the boss saying to himself:

> Somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using the word “prefer” upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further the deeper aberration might it not yet produce? (Melville, 1853/1967: 81)

Bartleby’s practice produces an abnormality in speech, an abomination of a major language, creating an ‘original language within language’—thus undermining the signifyingness of ‘language in its entirety’ (Deleuze, 1998: 72). Elsewhere, Deleuze and Guattari are to consider this deformation of language at length, glorifying the severing of the apparently concrete link between signifier and signified in terms of the concept of a ‘minor language’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 16–27). Our lawyer/narrator friend finds himself helplessly infected by the viral logic of preference; he becomes transformed by it and supplanted into a position where the comfort of the past categories that cemented the contingency of the situation has become irredeemable. Bartleby’s utterance transforms his boss and co-workers. And so, too—it transforms Bartleby himself, as if it existed somehow independently from him. As the story progresses Bartleby gives up fulfilling the one exercise he formerly performed, copying. And it is significant that a figure defined by saying and doing the same thing over and over should turn against the act of copying. Deleuze argues that the cessation of copying is in fact the inevitable outcome of Bartleby’s being Bartleby. When one utters, ‘I would prefer not to’, one must also cease to perform that which is simultaneously preferred, as all reference, all will, is forfeited. The logic of ‘I would prefer not to’ spreads and takes over all of Bartleby’s being, resulting in the situation where he prefers not to…anything (see Deleuze, 1998: 70). By breaking through the sedimented structures of subordination, Bartleby’s identity as subordinate is dislocated and a sort of contingent freedom is found in his very lacking of determination.

Bartleby avoids playing the ‘game of exemplarity’ (ten Bos and Rhodes, 2003), he does not engage in bargaining. He is not to be bought with money, threatened with dismissal or forced to work through recourse to any notion of punishment. He does not recognize these trivial conventionalities. He is not to be managed, neither as office clerk, nor as revolutionary. Management abhors the moment when the age-old script breaks down: Bartleby is precisely that moment, a moment where the machine of managerialism fails to assimilate that which resists it. Perhaps this is because Bartleby puts nothing in the place of that which he has taken away. To prefer not to…everything is, as Deleuze points out, not to prefer to…anything. That which does not (yet) exist cannot be systematized and the future, if it is to come, is to come as itself, rather than as something already prepared for. This is exactly what Agamben (1993: 1) means when he says that ‘the coming being is whatever being’.

Bartleby refuses encapsulation within any social role; he refuses encapsulation within the social field as such. His formula ‘stymies all speech acts’, making him ‘a pure outsider
to whom no social position can be attributed’ (Deleuze, 1998: 73). As a pure outsider, Bartleby ‘can survive only in a suspense that keeps everyone at a distance’ (ibid.: 71). Bartleby seeks to ‘be’ outside or beyond the social, to escape his entrapment inside the social—to exceed the social. His logic of preference, the ‘I would prefer not to’, is not a positive logic of will. To ‘prefer not to’ is not an affirmation of one’s own desires, preferences, wants or needs nor indeed is it even an affirmation of the inverse—Bartleby is not gesturing towards that which he does not want. We are not dealing with a process of selection nor one of elimination. We here encounter a being without desire, without will, a life without opinion, absolute indifference, a ‘nothingness of the will’ (ibid.). Bartleby is absolutely immanent to himself—there is no dialectic here, he affects the world and there is no reverse movement. When the lawyer interprets Bartleby’s utterance as ‘You will not?’, he responds ‘I prefer not’, thus abandoning any trace of will (as in ‘I would prefer not to’) that might have been left over (Agamben, 1999: 254). Bartleby completely expunges the very possibility of being infiltrated by the social. It is the world that attempts to absorb him, but he makes no countermovement—there is quite simply no will for him to do so, nor does he will this not to be the case. Unless we can imagine what it is to be absolutely untouched by the social then we cannot imagine what being Bartleby would be like.

THE WHATEVER BARTLEBY

[The only ethical experience (which, as such, cannot be a task or a subjective decision) is the experience of being (one’s own) potentiality, of being (one’s own) possibility—exposing, that is, in every form one’s own amorphousness and in every act one’s own inactuality. (Agamben, 1993: 44)]

Bartleby ‘exists’ in a state of pre-being, potentiality. His is not being ‘in a self-identical sense’, but rather being as pure potentiality. Here potentiality is not a will to be, nor is impotentiality a necessity (Agamben, 1999: 254). Impotentiality is not the negative residue that is discarded when the will asserts itself. Rather, impotentiality is the necessary other to potentiality (ibid.). If there was only potentiality without impotence, then there would only be teleology—there would be no change, no future. Bartleby affirms his impotence (to us), his possibility to not be, in order to suggest his potentiality. Any potentiality that is actualised in existence would signify the triumph of potential over impotential (since the impotential becomes potential and is hence eradicated). Actuality is the end of potentiality, always already a compromise, a loss of what could have been. Bartleby has come to recover what could have been (ibid.: 270), to reaffirm impotentiality. There is so much that Bartleby could have been, becoming could have taken flight in innumerable directions but in the end he arrived at the point from which he commenced, a point of potentiality, of a yet-to-put-itself-in-place, not even a yet-to-be but a yet-to-become. Impotentiality is not a powerlessness, a lack, nor a resignation in the face of power; on the contrary, it is the affirmation of possibility as such. As Agamben argues:

For if it is true that whatever being always has a potential character, it is equally certain that it is not capable of only this or that specific act, nor is it therefore simply incapable, lacking in power, nor even less is it indifferently capable of everything, all-powerful. The being that is properly whatever is able to not-be; it is capable of its own impotence. (Agamben, 1993: 35)

In the face of power, of the calling of the law, of the threat of a job loss, Bartleby holds firm to potentiality. Because any social practice requires the discarding of other possibilities, it is always already a discarding of what could have been. Bartleby’s radical practice, his ‘I would prefer not to’, thus makes it impossible for him to be put into form, shaped, restricted, violated or confined (see also ten Bos, 2005: 38). This is life as pure potentiality. So when we worry about Bartleby’s mortality and the fact that he dies in the end, we miss the mark, we
miss the image of thought he portrays to us. Pure potentiality moves beyond Being and Non-Being, beyond life and death. It means dwelling in a place of the ‘no more than’—no more, and no less, than being-able. Bartleby creates his own ontology (Agamben, 1999: 259); there is no essence because essence implies teleology, fixation, and stillness; but neither is there existence, which is always a denial of what is not, a making impossible of the possible. The Nothing that Bartleby inhabits is not the Nothing of death, for death is the ultimate vindication of all possibility, the erasure of all potentiality. Rather, Bartleby’s Nothing is ‘the luminous spiral of the possible’, it is living ‘on the threshold between Being and Non-Being’ (ibid.: 257). The threshold, the edge, the border—but perhaps also the verge, the abyss, the gulf and the void, all looming large. ‘To be able is neither to posit nor to negate’ (ibid., emphasis in original).

Bartleby does not announce a different future; refuse obeisance in order to establish his own superiority; engage in an antagonistic struggle asserting a different world order; posit a being otherwise. Neither does he negate; he does not abhor the future; reject a different social order; condemn struggle. He exceeds this enforced choice. He simply prefers not to. Bartleby is not concerned with actuality at all. His is the world of potentiality, he forever remains a basis for whatever will be, simultaneously inviting interpretation and exceeding encapsulation. Bartleby shows us not what is possible but instead offers a glimpse of the nature of possibility as such.

**DISCUSSION**

[...]parting with the reader, let me say, that if this little narrative has sufficiently interested him, to awaken curiosity as to who Bartleby was, and what manner of life he led prior to the present narrator’s making his acquaintance, I can only reply, that in such curiosity I fully share, but am wholly unable to gratify it. (Melville, 1853/1967: 99)

Bartleby is not a messiah, ‘nor the symbol of anything whatsoever’ (Deleuze, 1998: 68). Yet in spite of this he compels so many that encounter him to write about him, to make sense of him, to allow him to live after he himself has left us all behind. It is, after all, the lawyer that brings the story of Bartleby to us in the first place, seeing it as his duty not to allow the memory of Bartleby to become burnt just like the many dead letters his (alleged) previous occupation forced him to bare witness to. Of course Bartleby overcomes any message we endow upon him, necessarily and thankfully so. All we have of what he actually means is a trace, a trace of what he never became, a trace of what he could have been but never was. We throttle his potentiality by pulling him into our actuality, here, now, on this sheet, in the room(s) in which we write, read and debate. The impossibility of this essay lies in its’ writing of possibility, in its transformation of the possible into the actual, its swallowing of what could have been into what is. We will necessarily have failed for we have filled time and space with content, scratching and inscribing all over the surface of sheets. All of this we are ready to admit; indeed it is this very failure that all essays, as attempts, necessarily invite. Clearly the whatever of Bartleby is only and always for him, whatever that might be. He cannot send us a message nor can he help us in our making of decisions.

These are some of the lessons we need to learn from Bartleby, prior to engaging him and his formula politically. We have suggested that engaging with Bartleby at the literary level is a necessary predecessor to the move which politically commits him. This is not to foreclose or prohibit political interpretations; rather, it is to take them seriously. Clearly, as the acute reader will have noticed, there are plenty of political implications to be found in the interpretations of Bartleby offered by Agamben and Deleuze. How Bartleby fits into their politico-theoretical edifice, though, is a completely different matter. As has been argued, for Hardt
and Negri, and for Zizek, Bartleby was cast within a particular role, the very insurrectionary role which both Agamben and Deleuze denied to him. Denying to themselves the Politics as Starting Point argument, Bartleby offers a greater challenge to both Agamben and Deleuze.

In Agamben, Bartleby plays a crucial role both for the Coming Community (Agamben, 1993), and for the question of how potentiality can resist the law (Agamben, 1998: 39–48). That being so, the exact role that Bartleby must adopt within such projects is not rigorously formalized. Bartleby resides at the centre of many of the problematics of Agamben’s politics—but he offers no solutions in this regard. Similarly, Ranciere has demonstrated how Bartleby pushes Deleuze’s engagement with literature as the promise of a people to come to the limit. Literature ‘opens no passage to a Deleuzian politics’; rather, in reading Bartleby, Deleuze is said to push his thought to the limit, and thus ‘clears the way of Deleuzianism and sends it into the wall’ (Ranciere, 2004: 164). Again, Bartleby does not provide answers; instead he points out the limits of a possible politics.

At the same time, all of this is not to say that it is only Agamben or Deleuze we should look towards with regards to the ongoing task of interpreting Bartleby. Derrida (1995) is perhaps the voice most notable for its absence in this regard. Indeed, Alexander Cooke (2005) argues that Deleuze and Agamben ignore the conditions of possibility of Bartleby’s act and has little faith in Bartleby’s ‘I would prefer not to’ being able to stand up to the law in any meaningful way. Cooke’s analysis heavily implies Derrida’s work, especially his essay ‘Force of Law’ (Derrida, 2002) as a worthy alternative. Unfortunately, Cooke’s discussion doesn’t go into any great detail in this regard. Otherwise, consider Timothy Deines’ (2006) commentary on Agamben, Deleuze, Hardt and Negri, in which he evokes Nancy’s and Derrida’s work as a means of criticizing these author’s position on community, and their lack of engagement with the importance of the moment of decision and subjectivity. These are clearly just a few lines in which an alternative engagement with Bartleby might proceed—at the beginning of all this, though, must always stand a close reading of the text itself, as far as possible apart from that this or that theoretical ‘lens’ or ‘perspective’.

This in turn brings us back to the plight of a management and organization studies increasingly rendering fictional work relevant to itself. Having engaged with only some of the recent complexities exemplified within contemporary discussions of only one short story, we are intensely reluctant to offer our unqualified support towards such a project. What follows may well be a banal point, but it is also one worth bearing in mind nonetheless: fictional works are not unambiguous. The idea that a turn towards fiction will aid the organizational analyst is an intensely naïve one. Literary criticism is a serious intellectual discipline. Having read a nice little story, we don’t instantly become literary critics. Serious scholarship requires serious commitment. In turning towards fiction, organizational theorists must also be prepared to take seriously the many debates and controversies created by the works of fiction they choose to draw upon, apply and ‘use’. Our proposal to the literary management and organization studies is this: either take literary theory seriously or leave it alone. We are by no means claiming to have done such serious literary theory here. Rather, what we hope to have done is gesture towards the inherent difficulties of even attempting to do so. If this piece serves to encourage organization theorists to undertake serious studies of literature, we would be delighted.

As for Bartleby, we are reluctant to leave the reader that has journeyed this far with us completely empty handed after all has been said and done. So, in spite of all we have said in relation to Bartleby’s radical indeterminacy there is still something we can take from him for ourselves and share with you. It is clear that Bartleby gestures to us, in as much as he makes us aware of, our own potentiality, a potentiality that can never and will never vanish, an always unexhausted and unlimited reserve. Perhaps we might abandon busyness and abandon the logic of practice that dominates the institutions we recreate continually. Perhaps, much
like Bartleby, we might ‘prefer not to’...this or that: standing in corridors, staring at ventilation shafts, interrupting the endless flow of papers—this, that, whatever. In Bartleby we see the progressive potentiality of excess, the potential to be found and felt precisely in our in(cap-)ability to order and organize, here and now. It is this exceeding, the excess of Bartleby, that expresses to us the hope that is to be found in what we do not yet know nor understand, the future, the to come, the not yet and perhaps never will be. Bartleby is precisely the image that reminds us of the power of indeterminacy, of the hope that is to be seen precisely in not being able to determine what it is that’s going on. The excess of Bartleby, the excess that we are always yet to figure out and put in place, is precisely the yet to arrive freedom he suggests to us, precisely the freedom Sartre (2001) once promised us from all great literature.

Bartleby, an image of thought determining nothing and simultaneously promising the possibility of everything. Bartleby, not a political phenomenon but a phenomenon becoming political. Bartleby, not a fully formed answer to the problem of radical politics as such but the very potentiality of a politics yet to come. Bartleby, the spectre of each of our own potential- ities haunting us. Bartleby, the pre-conditions of the quodlibet. Bartleby, excess to all requirements and simultaneously the excess that we all require. ‘Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!’ (Melville, 1853/1967: 99). Ah Organization Studies! Ah Literature!

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