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Bartleby is Dead: Inverting common readings of Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*

ABSTRACT: This paper argues against dominant philosophical interpretations of Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* and submits it to an educational reading. It problematizes readings (such as those of Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, and the Occupy Movement) where the character of Bartleby figures a way of being that allows us to escape or challenge our contemporary political and educational exigencies. Our contention is that an encounter with Bartleby is not politically or educationally enabling, but provokes the Lawyer, despite himself, to encounter the unedifying limits of any educational practice and discourse, as well as his necessary complicity in the context that supports them. We argue that anyone interested in education or politics would do much better to scrutinize their unavoidable affinity with the Lawyer, instead of projecting fantasies of escape on the character of Bartleby, who, in the end, only figures a giving up on life.

Herman Melville's short story *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* narrates the gradual decline of a scrivener, or copyist, called Bartleby, who stops working and eventually ceases living. This occurs much to the confusion and eventual consternation of his kindly employer, the Lawyer, who finds that he cannot reason with or appeal to Bartleby. As we outline below, the enigma of Bartleby continues to stimulate thought and practice, with Melville's story achieving the status of a key philosophical and political, as well as literary, text. In such commentary Bartleby has served divergent ends, ranging from his co-option as a political role model, to the suggestion that Bartleby points beyond politics, revealing the limits of contemporary political thought. We review these readings, which range from radical left, humanist interpretations of

Bartleby (Hardt and Negri, *Occupy Wall Street*), to what might be described as post-structural and queer readings (Edelman, Derrida, Agamben, Deleuze, Blanchot), which emphasize Bartleby's non-humanist attributes. Despite their differences, readings of Melville's story remain riveted onto the character of Bartleby. He has become an emblematic figure, and as such, is overburdened with philosophical and political significance. Working with but also against such readings, we offer a 'third' alternative, one that displaces interest in Bartleby with a more primary concern with the role of the Lawyer-as-educator, and interprets their relationship through an educational lens.² Here we adopt a fairly expansive understanding of educational relations, in that we view education in modernity to be a dominant influence in the construction of subjectivity, informing how we relate to one another both in and outside educational institutions. All social relations in modernity are educational in this broader sense, where society has been almost fully pedagogized.³ Ours is a relational, educational reading then, that focuses on the educational and political confrontation which takes place in this short story between the Lawyer and Bartleby. This relationship is worth investigating because it reveals the desperation of post-Enlightenment thought and educational practice (represented by the Lawyer) as it attempts to cope with anything that resists its interventions.

Post-Enlightenment education is defined, we claim, by the explicit or covert persistence of Enlightenment values such as reason, tolerance and progress in a technicized social model. These Enlightenment values serve to prop up a range of social practices, not least those associated with mass education, that might otherwise appear inexcusable, unbearable, or simply without sanction. Our claim is that commentaries which focus heavily on the character of Bartleby, come far closer to representing the Enlightenment and (according to the story) 'Ciceronian' Humanist values of the Lawyer.⁴ Even if such readings emphasize how Bartleby exceeds meaning, they still incorporate Bartleby by attempting to make a lesson of him. We argue, by contrast, that there is something deeply unedifying about Bartleby, something that can

only prompt the Lawyer to return to and seek support from his ailing philosophical and political framework.

According to our reading, Bartleby symbolizes a basic, underlying inertia that is still felt to retard the onslaught of a set of atrophied but nonetheless powerful Enlightenment narratives. Bartleby represents the stupefaction of all that resists and continues to resist the call to reason and morality. Bartleby is the inert remainder that education and politics fail to revive or co-opt into their conceptions of life and meaningful exchange. The Lawyer's response to Bartleby's presence is highly significant and worth engaging with, since it invites us to consider our complicity (as Lawyer-type characters) in maintaining the intellectual, educational and political structures of our time.

Our argument is that, although the Lawyer repeatedly fails in his attempts to rescue Bartleby, he finds himself only stimulated to further action. Bartleby's refusal is of a kind that only serves to support the logic of redemption that informs the Lawyer's actions. This logic is explored most thoroughly (although not in relation to Melville's story) by Leo Bersani in *The Culture of Redemption*, where "a crucial assumption in the culture of redemption is that a certain type of repetition of experience in art repairs inherently damaged or valueless experience" (Bersani 1). Thus, quite contrary to liberatory readings of Bartleby as an exemplary character of resistance or refusal, we argue that the story itself (in its repetitive attempts to integrate Bartleby) represents an immanent critique of the desperate need for interpreters to assign meaning to and organize that which exceeds understanding. There is something recurrent and unedifying acted out in most commentary on *Bartleby the Scrivener*, which consistently places Bartleby in service of life, though Bartleby is a figure of abdication, atrophy, and death.

As we critique the role of the Lawyer insofar as it perpetuates the atrophied frameworks of post-Enlightenment education, we nonetheless argue that the disposition of the Lawyer is inescapable in our political and educational moment. Equating Bartleby with the arena of death and nothingness that lies beyond the limits of educated, intentional being, and the Lawyer with

all attempts to save the individual, and rescue politics and education from nothingness, we argue that there is today an inverse relationship between the two. An encounter with Bartleby is not in itself politically or educationally liberatory, though it provokes the Lawyer, despite himself, to encounter the unedifying limits of any educational practice and discourse, as well as his necessary involvement in the context that supports them. We argue that anyone interested in education or politics would do much better to scrutinize their unavoidable affinity to the Lawyer, rather than projecting fantasies of escape on the character of Bartleby, who, in the end, only figures a giving up on life.

Bartleby as political role model

As a role model, Bartleby has been co-opted by recent intellectual and activist thought and practice. Those faced with situations they find intolerable are drawn to, and would like to say, with Bartleby, *I would prefer not to*. In Melville's story, Bartleby's insistence on that statement appears to confound power, or at least confound the type of power represented by modern liberal societies, which operates on the belief and basis that it is fundamentally benevolent. The Lawyer is described as a civilized, humane man. As such, he represents the typical ideological cover for a social order that cannot accept Bartleby's refusal. Bartleby's refusal ensures that the violence of that order becomes evident; where the only solution after all else has failed is to relegate Bartleby to "the Tombs" (Melville 37).

The political attraction of a figure such as the character of Bartleby is threefold. First, Bartleby is used to support the idea that it is possible, or at least worth attempting, to resist absolutely. Second, Bartleby suggests that absolute refusal does not have to be violent. Third, Bartleby's refusal is not an act of self-assertion, as he does not refuse in such a way that denies, or diminishes others. This story suggests that peaceful refusal can indeed draw power out from the shadows and force it to reveal itself where it would like to appear most benign.

Those looking to Bartleby for inspiration believe that a form of passive refusal, similar to Bartleby's, might succeed where more conventional protest has failed. Often still mobilized within a liberal democratic frame, this reading suggests that a politics of refusal might overcome apathy without encouraging partisanship, and reinvigorate the politics of civilized, peaceable dissent. This reading is most famously associated with the Occupy Wall Street protests, which began in September 2011, where activists hoped to absent themselves from a corrupt polity, and work with one another in ways that would prevent one self-affirming subject from impinging upon the other (Gersen; Martyris). It is also found in the work of Hardt and Negri, who find in Bartleby a form of refusal that "cannot but appeal to our hatred of authority", for it is "the beginning of liberatory politics". His refusal is viewed as signifying a beginning, a line in the sand, after which we must move beyond refusal and "construct a new mode of life and above all a new community" (Hardt and Negri 204). As indicated above, we remain unconvinced by this analysis, not least because Bartleby, and those that take the extent of his refusal seriously, would not be around to contribute, because it amounts to a denial of life – a point we develop below.

Bartleby and the limits of the human

In an important intervention and critique of the above position, Lee Edelman attempts to rescue Bartleby from humanist readings by emphasising his queerness. Bartleby offers an implicit critique of humanist discourse, Edelman argues, representing the 'nonhumanity' that each assertion of the human drowns out. If Bartleby teaches us anything, he "teaches us nothing – or, more precisely, the *place* of that nothing, that non, in the politics of the human". Bartleby demonstrates a negative preference that "the governing orders, the circuits of opinion, the frameworks of collective reality make invisible, impossible, and, to that extent, unthinkable" (Edelman "Occupy Wall Street: "Bartleby" against the Humanities" 114-15). In Bartleby we discover how humanist appropriations of Bartleby eradicate his queerness by attempting to embrace it, not least by the Lawyer, whose

exclamations at the end of “Bartleby” aspire on his part, if not on Melville’s, to present as self-evident that the now-deceased scrivener, who in life refused charity, companionship, and the lawyer’s best efforts to understand him, embodied, despite this, the very essence of a pitiable “humanity.” In leading us to this recognition, the lawyer, or so he would have us believe, expresses his own “humanity” by displaying his moving capacity to be moved by what he so vividly imagines. (Edelman "Occupy Wall Street: "Bartleby" against the Humanities" 107).

Insofar as Bartleby exceeds that which it is possible to imagine, he is employed as part of Edelman’s larger project, that “stakes its claim...to the space that ‘politics’ makes unthinkable, the space outside the frame within which ‘politics’ appears and thus outside the conflicting visions that share as their presupposition that the ‘body politic’ must survive” (Edelman "Post-Partum"). Bartleby signifies the ‘outside’ of liberal discourse. His presence generates a disturbance within it.

Edelman’s critique is only one of the latest theoretical interventions to focus on Bartleby’s alterity as ultimately exceeding the political, rather than figuring it. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida discusses Bartleby in passing, claiming that Bartleby resists signification by saying nothing determinate. His statement, *I would prefer not to*, “utters nothing fixed”, is neither positive nor negative, though it is still an utterance. This “indeterminacy creates a tension”, Derrida argues, or at least reveals the tension that is to be found in any moment of in/decision, where no decision can be finally and conclusively justified as if it were a responsible decision (Derrida 75). Here, Bartleby bears analogy to the biblical figure, Abraham (the real object of Derrida’s interest), who obeys a higher purpose given by an unknowable God, a purpose that must remain forever obscure to human reason, and thus beyond the grasp of ethics, philosophy, politics, law, even language, since that would reduce Abraham and the predicament he faces to human understanding. The significance of Abraham for Derrida, following Kierkegaard, is that he is

singular and entirely isolated in that moment before God. Abraham is prepared to give up everything he loves, and sacrifice Isaac against his own wishes and against human convention, in an act of faith. The great mystery of what Abraham is about to do, and is prepared to do, is that Abraham's sacrifice, his resolve to commit infanticide, must always be beyond comprehension. The difference between Abraham and Bartleby is that Abraham would prefer not to when faced with the command to kill Isaac before an unknowable God, whereas Bartleby would prefer not to when faced with the command to work given by an agent of the law who operates in a world that makes no overall sense. As Derrida argues, Bartleby is prepared to sacrifice himself by following a course of action, or inaction, "that will lead him to death, a death given by the law, by a society that doesn't even know why it is acting in the way it does" (Derrida 76). His decision, like Abraham's, is beyond its comprehension and thereby gestures to the limits of human understanding. We are constantly confronted by those limits in every decision we make, Derrida argues, where each decision is as much a leap of faith as it is a consequence of reason. Bartleby helps us to interrogate those limits, Derrida claims, through a form of "sublime irony" similar to Socratic irony, which is committed to not saying anything whilst speaking, in order to open up an interrogation (Derrida 76). We argue, nonetheless, that to read Bartleby's decline towards death as a leap of faith might itself be a little too humanising, not least because of the complex inter-relation between faith and reason. In our view, Bartleby exhibits no outward sign of concern with faith or reason. It is perhaps his complete lack of concern that stimulates the redemptive critical gesture of critique, which insists that Bartleby must signify something about our condition, where we find this determination to make sense of Bartleby, even in the work of philosophers who would usually be considered too sophisticated and sensitive to critiques of humanism to fall into such traps.

Deleuze devotes an essay to *Bartleby the Scrivener*, and submits Bartleby, along with other characters from Melville's texts, to an extraordinarily optimistic reading. Deleuze claims that Bartleby travels outside intelligibility, confronting the world with "the imperfection of its laws"

(Deleuze 83). Bartleby travels beyond the grasp of intelligible things, preferring “no will at all, a nothingness of the will rather than a will to nothingness”. This abdication of will makes Bartleby a near “saintly” character (Deleuze 80), an “Original” who speaks back to us from the primal oneness of “Primary Nature” (Deleuze 83). As a paternal figure, the Lawyer attempts to cajole Bartleby and submit him to the Law, but as Melville’s works demonstrate, “there are no good fathers...only monstrous, devouring fathers, and petrified, fatherless sons. If humanity can be saved, and the originals reconciled, it will only be through the dissolution and decomposition of the paternal function” Only then will we realize “the fruit” with which these Originals “are laden: the fraternal relation pure and simple”. By reuniting the Original (who is in contact with the amorphous mass of primary nature) with humanity (which is hitherto limited by its separation from nature), Deleuze proposes that it is possible to constitute a “society of brothers as a new universality” (Deleuze 84). We must travel outside the Law (represented by the Lawyer), Deleuze suggests, in order to save humanity from its reduction of existence to that which can be made intelligible, and from the divisions that reduction creates between ‘intelligible’ beings. In our view, this somewhat ironic vitalising and socialising of the character of Bartleby seems to do exactly what we (and Edelman) have suggested the Lawyer is attempting to do by humanising him. In the same essay, Deleuze makes a large number of grand but also somewhat superficial and binarising claims (of Melville’s whole oeuvre, in fact) that also dilute or ‘normalize’ the Bartleby character. Most problematically, he agrees with what he interprets as the Lawyer’s narrative on Bartleby’s psyche, wherein the latter is perceived as being concerned with having “won the right to survive” (Deleuze 71). Contrary to this argument, we argue that survival seems to be the last thing on Bartleby’s mind – at least as displayed by all of his readable actions. In our interpretation, a finally achieved Bartlebyism would not look like this; instead, it would simply be, as it is in the story, death.

Agamben concentrates on how Bartleby represents an escape from reason and the demands it makes, and an escape from the supposed dominance, or assumed prior necessity of

the will (Agamben). Accordingly, Bartleby exists in a no-man's land of radical potentiality, evading both reason and will. In Agamben's critique (which is the only approach to Bartleby we are aware of that has been taken up in and applied to an educational context⁵) – reason and will are usually understood as being foundational, operating together to organize existence. This can be seen in the insistence that we understand ourselves, our choices, and what we can achieve, according to the dictates of will and reason, or the logic of willing. This understanding of human potential, of how human potential becomes actual, is highly restrictive, Agamben argues. But it needs to be sidestepped rather than negated, he claims, because negation remains trapped within the problem it tries to escape. Bartleby achieves this feat, because in Bartleby we encounter pure potentiality, a moment of perfect indecision, as Bartleby exists in the space between being and not-being. The possibility of human freedom is located here, according to Agamben. Freedom for Agamben is not simply the ability to actualize what we want, or what we reason to be necessary, but to be free to evade the demand to do so. Only once we do this, when we realize our capacity to exist in that moment of absolute contingency, will we be able to see that other worlds are possible. Again, we take issue with such an analysis, which puts Bartleby to use to make an existential point. While Agamben's reading of the enigmatic grammar of Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" (also explored by both Blanchot and Deleuze, see below and above) offers a position from which to reflect on impotentiality, the story of Bartleby would seem to utterly confound Agamben's formulation. To develop the point introduced above, Bartleby's disposition ultimately results in what it is difficult to describe as anything but a refusal of life and all it offers. Grammatically, yes, the decision of this refusal is not clearly articulated, but in his actions beyond language Bartleby moves further and further towards an absolute refusal of life which, of course, cannot exist in the space between being and non-being because it is death. As Blanchot, much more astutely affirms, Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" is in fact a complex and unfamiliar form of "refusal" (Blanchot 17, 141). It is closer to being an "abdication" than a "denial" (Blanchot 17). If, as Agamben would have us believe, it produces freedom, it is only

because death removes all chains. The distinction between Agamben's reading and Blanchot's is that the former, like so many others, reads Bartleby as representing a positional ideal (this time, impotentiality) that Bartleby, in fact, exceeds and invalidates through death. Blanchot, unlike Agamben, reads the whole story, so to speak, and, in so doing, understands that Bartleby's disposition is irreconcilable with life. There is no impotentiality in death. In our reading which builds here on Blanchot's, Bartleby can only ever figure a freedom from life rather than a freedom in life.

Blanchot's reading is, then, decidedly less optimistic and the closest to our own. For Blanchot, Bartleby represents "the abandonment of self, a relinquishment of identity". With Bartleby "we have fallen out of being, outside where, immobile, proceeding with a slow and even step, destroyed men come and go" (Blanchot 17). This clipped and blunt summation of Bartleby's significance as an exceptional character is clearly the least romantic consideration of Bartleby's disposition and fate of those so far considered. To follow Bartleby's example would entail being destroyed, which is seemingly the opposite aim of his appropriation by Deleuze, Agamben, Hardt & Negri, and the Occupy Movement. Where they (along with Edelman and Derrida, in slightly more reserved manner) see Bartleby as an opportunity for redirecting life, indicating how we might go about troubling certainties and perhaps even travel outside them, Blanchot seems least invested in Bartleby as providing the means to transforming the status quo. In each case, however, Bartleby serves a salutary lesson, pointing to the 'outside'.

Pulling at the edges of these readings of Melville's short story, which exhibit an almost pathological focus on Bartleby as a living character and ultimately as a 'hero', 'saint', or figure of the outside, we argue that they all get caught up in the dynamics and language of his 'non-refusal' (especially Deleuze and Agamben), which is a significant but nonetheless selectively exploited aspect of the story. Equally, the moment any sort of (however minimal) 'redemptive' reading occurs (which only Blanchot seems to avoid, depending how he is read), their position oscillates

from standing in the place of their hero, Bartleby, to ‘becoming’ the Lawyer, in the sense of trying to impose a redemptive reading on precisely that which exceeds such a reading.

Bartleby as an educational stimulant

As a character, Bartleby is saturated with readings and counter-readings. Bartleby takes form as someone to emulate, or as a signifier pointing to the limits of thought. One way or another Bartleby will deliver us, either by redeeming us as humans, or pointing the way beyond our attachment to a particular (humanist) conception of ourselves.

We would like to suggest a different reading; one that views Bartleby as a limit point which offers no deliverance. As such, there is nothing particularly unusual or edifying about Bartleby. In educational terms, Bartleby is that which resists education, enlightenment, and educated people. But he produces them too. Though Bartleby represents the inevitable and recurring failure of education to achieve its aims, he also functions as the repeated motive for educational intervention. As such Bartleby can be many things, since education and educated people have many fears. Depending on the position from which he is interpreted, Bartleby could just as easily figure populism and anti-intellectualism. Bartleby is ‘post-truth’ politics and the denial of expertise. Bartleby is the permanently unemployed and the refugee who cannot be assimilated. Bartleby is unreason, terror, and fundamentalism. Bartleby is that which escapes reason and the injunction to submit to reason. Bartleby is what escapes protocol, manners and mannered debate. Bartleby remains immune to everything and everyone. He is anything you like, anything you fear, and anything that remains inert before the good intentions of ‘civilized’ being and its educational imperative. And though Bartleby is forever present, he only appears with such force and becomes such a ‘problem’ because modern education and politics universalize those good intentions.

To develop this (counter-)reading of Melville’s story, we approach the relationship between the Lawyer and his recalcitrant scrivener as an attempted educational relationship on the

part of the Lawyer, which Bartleby ultimately refuses. We suggest that the relationship might be considered exemplary, in that it demonstrates some typical features of modern education, where education in modernity is justified in terms of its (assumed) universal beneficence. The Lawyer demonstrates progressive and liberal minded traits that are shared with the modern teaching profession, which operates on the assumption that (in principle) no student is beyond help. As such, the teaching profession must remain fundamentally undisturbed by its own failures to teach recalcitrant students. Educational failure can only ever be encountered as a reason for redoubled educational effort.

From the perspective of the profession there are two basic types of inert educational subject:

Firstly, those who occupy and trouble the outer fringes of institutional education – the obvious ‘failures’ – where, in modern societies, this institutional production of failure has a perverse accompaniment, namely the belief that all young people must have access to education as if it were an inalienable right and obligation. As such, as a human right and an expression of humanity, education cannot be refused – that is the logic or ‘Law’ of modern education.

Secondly, those students (and their parents) who remain safely, comfortably within what education has become (where contemporary education is viewed by its critics as having become a shamefully instrumental endeavour). These students tacitly accept the reduction of education to the lowest common denominator by relating to it as it relates to them, namely instrumentally, and with a good dose of cynicism. Though instrumental students may succeed in terms of what now counts as ‘success’ in contemporary education – achieving learning outcomes as they are defined, exceeding their peers in examinations by absorbing and obeying the logic of the test – they are nonetheless failing in their appreciation of the wider, moral, intellectual mission of education.

Arguably, the teaching profession wishes to retrieve both types of student, and thereby redeem education by drawing them back to a more humanistic interpretation of the educational

mission. Education can overcome ignorance and cynicism, it believes, and orient us to something that lies beyond instrumental demands (Allen). Education encounters a Bartleby-like influence everywhere, then, and experiences that presence as an argument for more education.

In Blanchot's reading (which is, perhaps with Edelman's, least prone to optimism), Bartleby's passive refusal could instead be used to demonstrate the limits of power to intervene in his life and make the scrivener amenable to it. Bartleby's example could be interpreted as making a mockery of intervention as he remains inert to any rationale the Lawyer might offer for why he must concede, and by conceding, come to enjoy the fruits modern society has to offer, not least, the fruits offered by education. But in the narrative of the story his refusal does the opposite, and this, it seems to us, is the key point. Though the Lawyer is disturbed by Bartleby and led to question himself, for the bulk of the story the Lawyer manages to affirm himself as a benevolent representative of society, attempting to bring Bartleby back from the brink for their mutual benefit. Bartleby's refusal only paralyzes the Lawyer for an instant, after which it prompts him to innovate, and experiment, as he attempts to retrieve Bartleby and bring him round to the Lawyer's way of thinking. Bartleby's refusal only stimulates the Lawyer. The Lawyer experiences him as a stimulant. Bartleby's refusal, his alterity, feeds education as it feeds the humanistic intent of the Lawyer-as-teacher. A Bartleby-like presence is experienced as the basic reason and rationale for the repeated exertions of each educational order.

This formulation is similar to that which Lee Edelman describes it in his recent article, 'Learning Nothing: *Bad Education*', where, "Education...seals off and displaces the incomprehensible element, the *ab-sens*, that always drives its systematizations, while maintaining that element, dialectically, as the destabilizing other of education and knowledge" (Edelman "Learning Nothing: Bad Education" 129). Bartleby is a figure of this destabilizing other (and, for Edelman, a source of inspiration for a disruptive queer politics). As such, he is both incomprehensible and stimulating to the Lawyer. However, Bartleby must also remain incomprehensible to his readers, where any attempt to claim him for any order is impossible, as

he figures the very impossibility of its stabilization. And if politics is always concerned with the liveability of (some) life, then Bartleby's refusal of life must exist outside of all political thought and action, however radical.

The Lawyer as Educator: responding to Bartleby

Various techniques are employed by the Lawyer to rescue Bartleby through an education in to his own 'civilized' logic and behaviours. Many of these are repeated as the Lawyer cycles through his limited repertoire. This constant substitution of one approach for another mirrors, in the compressed space of the narrative, how education labours to secure its dominion and where the limits of education only cause it to switch endlessly across its own limited repertoire.

When Bartleby first becomes a problem for the Lawyer, with his declaration (to be repeated throughout the story), "I would prefer not to", the initial response is to put off the problem and deal with it later (Melville 11). The Lawyer decides to reduce Bartleby's negative effects on the rest of the workforce by isolating him from his fellows (placing a problematic individual in isolation is also, it should be noted, a well-known technique in the educational repertoire). But in his isolated state Bartleby's passivity is infectious. His passive turn of phrase begins "involuntarily" to roll off the tongue of others (Melville 24). It seems that the Lawyer only manages to defer the problem of Bartleby's refusal to work by isolating him and by asking another scrivener to cover for him until the problem of non-engagement can be addressed. This initial response is utterly symptomatic of educational activity, we argue, where problems are largely avoided, and certainly never solved, by deferring them to a future date.

The Lawyer also attempts to reason with Bartleby. He is even touched and moved to kindness by the strange enigma of Bartleby's refusal. Yet as Bartleby shows, he is beyond the purchase of reason and kindness, he does not subscribe to its "regime of truth", as Foucault might put it, where a regime of truth should be understood as an arrangement that involves, amongst other things, an obligation to submit to truth when it makes itself felt (Foucault *On the*

Government of the Living 93). This obligation is not the inevitable effect of reason, Foucault argues, but is set in place as a kind of social convention. Bartleby bears this out by refusing to oblige. Reason does not oblige Bartleby to conform to its protocols, something that confounds the Lawyer entirely. Unable to understand why reason does not operate as it should, the Lawyer does not give up on reason, but attempts it again, later in the narrative, hoping that “in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable”. “At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable” is the “mildly cadaverous reply” (Melville 23).

After his first attempt to reason with Bartleby, the Lawyer “begins to stagger in his own plainest faith’ and seeks ‘reinforcement for his own faltering mind” (Melville 13). In a similar way, educators are not immune to the effects of self-doubt and to doubt concerning the innate reasonableness of their educational mission. The experience of teaching is one of perpetual unsettlement, we would argue, where self-doubt is assuaged or continually deferred by switching techniques and cycling through an inherited repertoire. Abandoning the direct call to reason, the Lawyer also switches to recruiting Bartleby’s peers, his fellow scribes, to exert pressure of their own. In educational terms, this technique is again familiar. It has indeed been argued that a key innovation of the nineteenth century was to absorb peer-influence into the moral architectures of the popular or mass school. Here, fellow students were recruited and put to work under the superintending gaze of the schoolteacher, in an attempt to better counteract the subversive (unreasonable and immoral) training of the streets (Hunter). In Bartleby’s case, peer-influence fails absolutely, though as an educational technique one might say that it has never entirely succeeded, failing precisely in relation to those who, by choice or fate, will not conform to its evangelical mission.

Switching techniques again, the Lawyer attempts an outward display of benevolence, believing that he is Bartleby’s last hope: “If I turn him away, the chances are he will fall in with some less indulgent employer”. Here the Lawyer, like the educator, sustains himself by this redemptive hope, becoming quite taken with his charitable motives: “Poor fellow! thought I, he

means no mischief; it is plain he intends no insolence; his aspect sufficiently evinces that his eccentricities are involuntary” (Melville 15). The innocence of Bartleby – like the innocence of the child – is presumed. Or, if the educator does not subscribe to that remarkably persistent romantic notion, the child is at least excused for being as yet insufficiently educated. Her refusal is taken as evidence that she needs to be assisted, or should be helped to assist herself, so that she will become capable of immoral (rather than amoral) behaviour, and so capable of avoiding it, because she now understands the meaning of insolence, and the flaw of wilful mischief. Here the educator serves as a gateway to social mores, deciding to “humor [Bartleby, or the child] in his strange wilfulness”. That effort will “cost him nothing”, since his status as a representative of humane, civilized society is not in question. And so, while making that effort, hoping to bring the sweet benefits of education to the child, this teacher can “lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience” (Melville 15).

Patience is hard to sustain. Even when succoured by the thought that the child will eventually be redeemed. Patience can quickly slip into a form of irritation, approaching violence. The Lawyer swiftly travels from charitable sentiments to feeling “goaded” by Bartleby’s presence (Melville 15). He attempts, repeatedly, to move the problem on (i.e. get rid of Bartleby), which is another typical educational institutional response to difficulty, as problems (i.e. students) are shifted from one institutional setting to another. Schools even trade their so-called problems, or problem students, as one expelled student is exchanged for another from a different institution. But moving the problem on is, arguably, never a solution, and for that reason (returning to Melville), pity, despair, and revulsion constantly exchange places: pity subsides to despair: “a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me” (Melville 20). Despair and pity become revulsion: “just in proportion as the forlornness of Bartleby grew and grew to my imagination, did that same melancholy merge into fear, that pity into repulsion” (Melville 22); and revulsion becomes pity: “I was now in such a state of nervous resentment... [but] poor fellow!... he has seen hard times, and ought to be indulged” (Melville 30).

Throughout the story the Lawyer also submits Bartleby to close study. In general he does so by carefully observing Bartleby from his desk, though he also attempts, at one point, to directly question Bartleby and elicit some kind of insight into his psyche. Bartleby would prefer not to speak to him, of course, and the Lawyer is once again confounded: “But what reasonable objection can you have to speak to me? I feel friendly towards you” (Melville 23). Here the idea that the quest for understanding can be entirely well-meaning is mirrored by educational environments that assume greater transparency and more efficient data gathering is necessarily beneficial to education. It is assumed that ever better datasets, or better understandings of the context of teaching, or of the student by sensitized, better-trained, more insightful professionals, are necessary to drive educational improvement. Even soft data, and more humanistic modes of data gathering (conversations with students), are assumed to be beneficial and are not viewed, as Foucault viewed confessional activities, as an operation of power that (to put it very, perhaps overly, schematically) *produces* the truth it claims to uncover (Foucault *The Will to Knowledge*).

Though Bartleby seems unable, or unwilling to work for the Lawyer, the Lawyer insists upon believing that employment is a solution. In a similar way, the educator insists that education is a solution, though education is sometimes reconfigured as work in order to maintain that belief. Faced with students who remain utterly recalcitrant within a school setting, educators will insist on believing that if these students will not do the work that is required of the school, they will, they must, at least be able to find work acceptable in a different context. “You must do something, or something must be done to you” the Lawyer insists, and then presents a range of alternative forms of work (Melville 35). Oddly, this insistence that employment is, must be, a solution – surely there is a job to match Bartleby! – is more or less directly tied to a fear of “being exposed in the papers” (Melville 35). The educator operates in a similar way, fearful that public exposure will single out and thereby blame the teacher or institution in question for the failures that education must inevitably produce. Regarding the issue of a student’s subsequent employability, it is clearly unreasonable to hold educational institutions responsible for matching

individuals to jobs, as if educational institutions were not themselves victims of that increasingly impossible task (Blacker). But the fear of poor employment statistics endures, as does the more basic and well-intentioned belief that alternative, often ‘hands on’, employment is a solution for the child who does not ‘fit in’ to the work environment of the school.

Eventually the Lawyer decides that Bartleby cannot be saved. And yet, this does not cause him to confront his failure: “Bartleby, stay there behind your screen... I shall persecute you no more”. Bartleby is harmless, he tells himself. He is so inert that the Lawyer never feels “so private as when I know you are there” (Melville 31). The Lawyer accommodates himself to the presence of Bartleby and returns at last (after trying so many attempted alternatives) to the more basic technique of isolating Bartleby, eventually vacating the office himself. Removing himself from the situation is, again, no solution to the problem. The Lawyer tells himself that “I had now done all that I possibly could... I strove to be entirely care-free and quiescent; and my conscience justified me in the attempt” (Melville 37). Bartleby clings to the Lawyer (“he will not quit me”), and remains attached to him even in his absence (Melville 33). The Lawyer’s inability to escape Bartleby, reminds him that, as Bartleby’s employer (and educator), he swore to protect and look after him. He cannot abandon the commitment he made to Bartleby, which, for us, resembles the experience of an educator who must, by profession, remain committed to education.

Coda

We argue that if there is any lesson to be drawn from *Bartleby the Scrivener*, it is that educators remain haunted by a commitment from which there is no escape. This inescapable commitment constitutes the educational task of the Lawyer and both redeems him through his efforts directed towards Bartleby while also punishing him for their failure. Education is tied to what it finds repugnant, that is, to a Bartleby-like presence in the classroom and society. This Bartleby-like presence must haunt the classroom so long as education continues, since education produces

that spectre as its chosen problem, or problem-space, that justifies education. Here, educators are faced with a futile choice that is symptomatic of their entrapment. They can either return to education with redoubled effort, or desperately attempt to detach themselves from their commitment to it. Busy and engaged or exhausted and guilty, they are forced into themselves, tied to education (and the problem of Bartleby) by their educational bad conscience.

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¹ The order of authors' names is reverse-alphabetical and does not indicate priority. We would both like to acknowledge and thank the anonymous reviewers of this article, from whose comments and suggestions we have benefited.

² And here we do not claim that Melville intended the Lawyer to be understood as an educator; rather we draw attention to the educational imperatives that the story perhaps unwittingly reflects.

³ This is a questionable achievement: "Pedagogization could...be read in oppositional terms to pedagogical projects that aim for autonomy, liberation and independence. In this respect, pedagogization looks like a concept that is not dissimilar to 'medicalization'" A greater supply on the medical market does not necessarily lead to a more healthy society but can significantly increase the consumption of and dependence on healthcare." (Depaepe et al 15-16)

⁴ In this respect, we build on the argument by Robin Miskolcze, which is made in primarily ethical rather than educational terms.

⁵ See the work of Tyson E. Lewis (Lewis "The Architecture of Potentiality: Weak Utopianism and Educational Space in the Work of Giorgio Agamben"; Lewis "It's a Profane Life: Giorgio Agamben on the Freedom of Im-Potentiality in Education"; Lewis *On Study*) and Kristof K.P. Vanhoutte (Vanhoutte). In order to do justice to the range of influential readings of Melville's short story that may be found beyond the narrow confines of educational studies, we have not dwelled on Lewis and Vanhoutte's application of Agamben's thinking here, instead going to the sources of these readings; first to Agamben himself and then to Melville. Notably, while Vanhoutte's article, in its title ('Bartleby the Example and Eros the Idea of the Work: Some considerations on Giorgio Agamben's 'The idea of study'), suggests it might engage with Melville's story, it only does so through Agamben's reading. Lewis's readings are somewhat more problematic in that the first (Lewis "The Architecture of Potentiality: Weak Utopianism and Educational Space in the Work of Giorgio Agamben") misattributes the short story to 'Nathaniel Hawthorn' (p. 361), presumably a reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was an important influence on Melville but was not the author of the short story. In his book *On Study* (Lewis *On Study*), Lewis does correctly ascribe the authorship of the story to Herman Melville and even works through passages of the text (pp. 46-52). However, this reading is framed in terms of Agamben's idea of "im-potentiality" and as a "case study" of "the studier", rather than as a text with its own implications, at a remove from Agamben's reading. As such, these educational readings (or non-readings) of Melville's story reproduce many of the issues of Agamben's reading of Bartleby that we critique here. For a more direct critique of the educational implications of Lewis's Agambenian approach to the story see Emile Bojesen "Learning not to Learn".