

Subtraction from Supply and Demand: Challenges to Economic Theory, Representational Power, and Systems of Reference in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

Carolin Benack
Berlin, Germany

Abstract: Herman Melville's "Story of Wall Street" (1853), in which a lawyer gives an account of the life of the scrivener Bartleby, has been extensively commented on by scholars from a variety of disciplines. Many have found his enigmatic formula "I would prefer not to" to be the embodiment of a long sought-after remedy for seemingly fruitless revolts against oppressive capitalist mechanisms. In order to examine the potential of Bartleby's challenge to power, I will read it against the representational authority of economic theory, and, more specifically, the supply and demand model. The close reading of Melville's short story reveals that Bartleby's resistance to productivity and consumption indeed "opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position *and* its negation" (Žižek 393). In addition, I will provide a reading regarding representational power in relation to the narrator and the (de)stabilization of systems of meaning production, in which I will draw mostly on works by Agamben and Deleuze. Bringing together these three readings, however, renders doubtful the potential of such challenges to power. In fact, Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" might end up reaffirming already existing power structures.

The difficulty we are faced with," Joseph Vogl writes in the preface to his vastly successful *The Specter of Capital*, "is that the science of economics has spent the last three hundred years creating the very economic facts it is now struggling to decipher" (x). Despite the fact that Vogl's polemic statement might exaggerate the degree of influence the field of economics has established for itself, the representational authority of economic theory not only has an enormous impact

through its political implementation but also as a source of cultural knowledge. Economic theory thus stands alongside the hegemonic politico-economic sphere which so many scholars in the humanities and social sciences like to criticize. A figure that critics turn to in large numbers is Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853). The legal scribe who stops working and gives as an explanation nothing more than his famous "I would prefer not to" has drawn the attention of thinkers like Deleuze, Žižek, and Hardt and Negri. In their accounts, Bartleby becomes the model for a new form of resistance, and a figure that leads the way to the "beginning of a liberatory politics" (Hardt and Negri 204). While I agree that he succeeds in creating what I call a space of nonrepresentation and consequently a momentary destabilization of hegemonic power, I suggest that the challenge he represents ultimately not only remains unsuccessful but also affirms existing power structures.

To make this last point, I will draw on Giorgio Agamben's theory of the ghost and the child as unstable signifiers that question the system which produces our understanding of "human time" (*Infancy* 75). In the context of Agamben's philosophy, such an analysis is, of course, also an argument firmly embedded in the study of power structures. I therefore read Agamben's theory as describing the underlying forces of meaning production that translate into the exercise of sovereign power. The two agents who exercise such power in the context of this paper are the lawyer-narrator and a fundamental model of economic theory: supply and demand. I argue that, although Bartleby's retreat into a space of nonrepresentation threatens the representational power of both supply and demand, this retreat does not lead to an escape from either of these powers. Instead, the production process of this space and its contents ultimately serves to reaffirm the power structures it challenges.

I will first provide a more detailed account of Agamben's argument on the momentary destabilization of meaning production, and an explanation of the narrative behind the supply and demand model. I will then proceed with the analysis of Bartleby as an unstable signifier in Agamben's terms, and discuss whether the narrator succeeds in subduing the scrivener's threatening potential. Subsequently, I will analyze how Bartleby creates his peculiar space of nonrepresentation by examining his productivity and consumer behavior, before turning to my conclusive remarks.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As this paper draws on theories from very different scholarly fields, this section is designated to brief explanations of, first, Giorgio Agamben's work in *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (1978), and, second, the supply and demand model.

Subtraction from Supply and Demand: Challenges to Economic Theory, Representational Power, and Systems of Reference in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

Whereas Agamben describes a mechanism of the production of societal meaning, I propose that the supply and demand model is one way in which such meaning may be implemented. After this section on the theoretical background, I will show that *Bartleby* contains a threatening potential to the stabilizing forces that Agamben describes, and that this threat constitutes itself in the dialogue between the scrivener's behavior and the supply and demand model.

Agamben's Unstable Signifiers

In his theory of potentiality Agamben explicitly discusses Melville's scrivener and constructs him as an agent of human freedom.¹ One of his much earlier works, however, provides us with another—ultimately less positive—way of reading *Bartleby* by introducing the child and the ghost as forces that contain the potential to destabilize our familiar system of reference.

In *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (1978), Agamben describes infancy as a peculiar state with the ability to challenge language by going beyond the unsayable and therefore locating the limits of language within the child's experience, rather than in its outside form—the referent. To further establish the link between infancy and language, he uses the binaries of ritual and play in order to draw a comparison to Saussure's categories of synchrony and diachrony.² For Agamben, rituals serve to structure human time and thus render it static. The realm of the ritual is therefore synchronic. Play, on the other hand, most notably through its appropriation of objects that have outlived their usefulness as toys,³ belongs to the realm of history and is thus diachronic. According to Agamben, the interplay of the two categories, which are in a constant battle to dominate each other, produce our understanding of time:

[W]e can regard ritual and play not as two distinct machines but as a single machine, a single binary system, which is articulated across two categories which cannot be

- 1 In his essay "Bartleby; or On Contingency," Agamben writes about the scrivener's "experiment," the incessantly repeated "I would prefer not to": "In first philosophy, a being that can both be and not be is said to be contingent. The experiment with which *Bartleby* threatens us is an experiment *de contingentia absoluta*. [...] [I]he contingent, which can be or not be [...] coincides with the domain of human freedom in its opposition to necessity" (*Potentialities* 261).
- 2 Synchrony designates the "linguistic state" (Saussure 99) at any given point in time, whereas diachrony describes the change of language over time.
- 3 "[C]hildren, humanity's little scrap-dealers, will play with whatever junk comes their way, and [...] play thereby preserves profane objects and behaviour that have ceased to exist. Everything which is old, independent of its sacred origins, is liable to become a toy. [...] [I]he essence of the toy [...] is, then, an eminently *historical* thing: indeed it is, so to speak, the Historical in its pure state" (*Infancy* 70-71).

isolated and across whose correlation and difference the very functioning of the system is based. [...]

[I]f human societies appear in this light as a single system traversed by two opposing tendencies, the one operating to transform diachrony into synchrony and the other impelled towards the contrary, the end result of the play of these tendencies – what is produced by the system, by human society – is in every case a differential margin between diachrony and synchrony: *history; in other words, human time.* (*Infancy* 74-75)

Agamben's emphases already indicate the significance of his argument: The binary between synchrony and diachrony becomes the underlying force of our understanding of time. Thus, synchrony and diachrony become incredibly powerful agents of meaning production. However, he identifies two liminal figures with the potential to challenge these agents:

[T]he signifying opposition between synchrony and diachrony, between the world of the dead and the world of the living, is shattered not only by death. It is threatened by another critical moment, no less to be feared: birth. Thus here too we see unstable signifiers come into play: just as death does not immediately produce ancestors, but ghosts, so birth does not immediately produce men and women, but babies, which in all societies have a special differential status. If the ghost is the living-dead or the half-dead person, the baby is a dead-living or a half-alive person. (*Infancy* 83)

Whereas the dead and the living belong to synchrony and diachrony respectively, the ghost and the child represent two transitory states which, at least initially, destabilize this binary mechanism. For Agamben, the threat of both figures lies in their constant potential of converting into their opposites, as well as in their role as reminders of the gap between life and death. One way of subduing the dangerous potential of children and ghosts is the ritual: Both initiation and funeral rites transform them into living people and ancestors accordingly, thus again assigning them stable synchronic and diachronic features.

However, their ritualized reintegration into stable signifiers proves unnecessary, because the threatening potential of the child and the ghost is already inherent in their role as signifiers:

[G]hosts and children, belonging neither to the signifiers of diachrony nor to those of synchrony, appear as the signifiers of the same signifying opposition between the two worlds which constitutes the potential for a social system. *They are, therefore, the signifiers of the signifying function,* without which there would be neither human time nor history. [...]

So the social system can be pictured as a complex mechanism in which (unstable) signifiers of signification are counter posed to stable signifiers,

Subtraction from Supply and Demand: Challenges to Economic Theory, Representational Power, and Systems of Reference in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

but where in reality an exchange takes place between them to guarantee the functioning of the system. (*Infancy* 84-85)

Where Agamben saw only the opposition of diachrony and synchrony before, he now constructs a productive diametrical relationship between the two stable signifiers and the unstable signifiers of the child and the ghost. Thus, these two liminal figures—while containing an uncanny potential to challenge the agents of meaning production—end up reaffirming the system as a whole.

The Supply and Demand Model

Economic theory is a form of representation which has been highly successful in its institutional implementation, making it a highly influential agent of meaning production in society. As will be shown in the following sections, *Bartleby* causes a momentary destabilization directed against such agents in a way that strongly correlates with Agamben's concept of the ghost and the child. While not suggesting that theoretical economic models are to be equated with the underlying mechanism of meaning production as described by Agamben, I suggest that they constitute one particular way in which meaning is constructed. In fact, the model I will discuss even displays certain similarities with Agamben's "binary system" (*Infancy* 74), as it also deals with two opposing forces which generate the equilibrium so dearly cherished by economists: supply and demand.

The graphical representation of this model, also known as the 'Marshallian Cross,' describes demand and supply in terms of their relationship between the price and quantity of goods and services. To this day, the downward-sloping demand curve crossing the upward-sloping supply curve has been one of the most widely used models in economics. Commonly, the negative demand slope is explained by the interplay of the income and substitution effects. The income effect describes the economic intuition that with falling prices the consumer's net income—meaning what they can effectively purchase with their money—rises, leading to an increase in consumption. Additionally, such a decrease in price makes the particular product relatively less expensive in comparison to similar goods or services, enticing consumers to substitute away from more expensive products—hence the name 'substitution effect.' The positive supply curve is usually explained with increasing marginal costs, that is, those costs that arise from the production of each additional unit. Suppliers are expected to increase production until their marginal costs match the price of the product. If prices thus increase, they cover higher marginal costs, consequently increasing the overall production output.

However, there are markets and conditions in which the curves of supply and demand are understood to behave differently. An example for this is the upward-sloping demand curve for so-called Giffen goods: Cheap products that are mostly bought by low-income consumers and take up most of their income. A price increase of such goods makes the consumer relatively poorer. Since these goods satisfy basic needs in low-income households, rather than buying less of the product, consumers cut away from their consumption of other products and buy more of the specific Giffen good.⁴ Consequently, the income effect in this case vastly outweighs the substitution effect.

This brief example of a differently-sloped demand curve serves to provide at least a glimpse at the versatility of the model and its applicability to virtually every market. In the light of its all-embracing usage, the supply and demand model thus becomes a universal representation of human behavior in terms of production and consumption. As I will argue in my analysis of *Bartleby*, the dangerous potential of the scrivener lies, much like in the case of Agamben's unstable signifiers, in the fact that he resists the application of the supply and demand model to his—nevertheless economic—behavior.

ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I will turn to the analysis of Melville's short story itself. Firstly, I propose that *Bartleby* challenges the representative power of the lawyer-narrator by fulfilling the role of both the ghost and the child. In this capacity, he causes a momentary destabilization of the narrative that, however, ultimately affirms the narrator's power position. This analysis will thus be about *Bartleby* as an unstable signifier, followed by an examination of the temporary collapses of the narrator's representative power. Secondly, by describing *Bartleby*'s peculiar kind of production and his withdrawal from consumption in two separate sections, I suggest that the story displays a very similar dynamic when brought into dialogue with the supply and demand model.

4 For a more detailed discussion of Giffen goods and inversely sloped supply and demand curves see Dwivedi 57-60.

Subtraction from Supply and Demand: Challenges to Economic Theory, Representational Power, and Systems of Reference in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

Bartleby's Destabilization of Power

Bartleby, as many interpretations note, is characterized by the fact that *he doesn't seem to be really there* (Semrau 69). In fact, from the moment when he stops copying legal papers he is being coded as a ghost-like appearance, oddly devoid of life. William Spanos even sees him as "the social allotrope of the nothingness of being," and notes that he "activates anxiety" (153). Bartleby's existence evokes uneasiness in everyone who comes into contact with him, be it the lawyer or the reader. The reason for his uncanny appearance, I suggest, is the fact that he—at least momentarily—provokes a destabilization of our familiar system of reference.

Indeed, Bartleby's peculiar position in the lawyer's Wall Street office plays an important role in his construction as a figure between the realms of life and death. In the very beginning of the story, the lawyer gives a somber and somewhat ironic account of his "chambers":

At one end they looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious skylight shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom. This view might have been considered rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call "life." But, if so, the view from the other end of my chambers offered at least a contrast, if nothing more. In that direction, my windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade, which wall required no spyglass to bring out its lurking beauties, but, for the benefit of all nearsighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my windowpanes. (4)

Thus, the occupants of the office have a choice to either look at a light or a dark wall, respectively; the former is depicted as somehow lifeless, the latter as confining. In fact, with Bartleby's arrival the dark wall is related to death as well because the scrivener spends most of his days staring at it in what the lawyer calls "dead-wall reveries" (21, 31). However, this allusion to death is also consciously linked to life because the white wall is associated not only with death, but with a deficiency of life.

In "Bartleby; or, The Formula" (1997) Deleuze describes the scrivener's relation to his working environment as follows: "Bartleby is to sit [...] between a window that faces the side of a neighboring building and a high screen, *green as a prairie* [...]. [T]he fact is that, caught in this arrangement, the invisible Bartleby does an extraordinary amount of 'mechanical' work" (75, emphasis added). By linking the screen to a prairie, Deleuze depicts Bartleby as a machine in the garden,⁵ which—along with the notion

5 For Deleuze, who draws on Leo Marx's 1964 *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, the intrusion of industrialism into the pastoral in this case of course does not

of mechanical work as a concept of power transmission in physics—turns him into a disruptive force, unconscious of the heavy impact he has on his environment. This explains the lawyer’s uneasiness at the sight of Bartleby’s industriousness before stopping to copy legal papers: “I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically” (11).

Therefore, it appears that Bartleby is less human when he works than when he stops to do so. From the moment he ceases to perform his duties as a scrivener, numerous references to death start to appear. Bartleby displays a “cadaverously gentlemanly *nonchalance*”⁶ (19) and a “morbid moodiness” (22); also, his “dead-wall reveries” (21, 31) commence, and, after being evicted from the Wall Street office which he continues to occupy even after business hours, he ends up in “the Tombs” (37), New York’s infamous prison. Hence, although work turns Bartleby into a machine, at least the withdrawal from work makes him into something that has the ability to die—which brings him closer to being human than anyone who is still in the ‘automated’ condition of the laborer. In conjunction with Hardt’s and Negri’s assessment of Bartleby as “a figure of generic being” (203), this provides a possible interpretation of the lawyer’s cryptic exclamation at the end of the story: “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!” (41) might not mean to construct Bartleby and humanity as opposites by implying that the rest of humanity has failed the dead character. Rather, Bartleby serves as the lone example of humanity in a dehumanizing economic environment. As I will show at a later point in this paper, this interpretation ties in with the construction of the lawyer’s employees as investments and hence dehumanized objects of consumption.

In fact, the role of the worker as a dehumanized figure is so close to Marx’s concepts of fetishism and self-alienation that it barely requires explicit reference. However, the exceptional space that Bartleby opens up with his condition of being-not-quite-but-at-least-somewhat-alive puts him in the liminal space between the worlds of the living and the dead described by Agamben. Indeed, Bartleby’s ghostly status as “living dead” is evident from the narrator’s descriptions quoted above, and has also been observed by others (De Boever 146).

However, I propose that Bartleby’s relationship to birth and the question of his origins suggest a proximity to the newborn-like status described by Agamben. When asked about his place of birth, Bartleby, as usual, prefers not to give an answer. Yet, here the lawyer observes the first and only sign of an emotional reaction: “[H]is countenance remained immovable, only there was the faintest conceivable tremor of

result in a synthesis of the two.

6 In fact, the term “cadaverous” appears several times, for instance on pages 23 and 29 of the short story.

Subtraction from Supply and Demand: Challenges to Economic Theory, Representational Power, and Systems of Reference in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

the white attenuated mouth" (23). Something about the lawyer's question apparently rattles the scrivener, who normally refrains from any emotional display—possibly an uncanniness about his existence that Bartleby himself perceives at this moment. Moreover, Bartleby's dead body is found lying in a fetal position: "[s]trangely huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up and lying on his side, his head touching the cold stones" (40). Also, at the very beginning of his account, the narrator states that "Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable except from the original sources" (3). His allusion to "original sources" makes the rumor he reports at the end, namely that the scrivener had been employed at the Dead Letter Office prior to working for the lawyer, the origin of Bartleby. Consequently, the unaccountable Bartleby emerges from the dead, is thus "dead-living," which corresponds to the realm that Agamben ascribes to the newborn, while simultaneously being coded as a ghostly "living dead" (*Infancy* 83).

In view of Agamben's reasoning, Bartleby in his uncanny double-occupation of both child and ghost thus becomes the ultimate destabilizing force of the signifying relationship between synchrony and diachrony by withdrawing from the two categories. However, because the unstable signifiers he represents end up affirming the signifying function, his destabilization of meaning is only momentary. Ultimately, his peculiar condition as both child and ghost implies not only a failed subversion but a necessary act of affirmation to uphold the system that the office stands for.

Therefore, Bartleby's withdrawal from work is on the one hand a move away from his dehumanized working-self and provokes at least a temporary destabilization of the system of meaning in which the causes of such a dehumanization are embedded. On the other hand, this destabilization only ends up affirming that very system. However, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" contains a variety of frictions and moments of defiance that make it difficult to give a conclusive judgment whether his defiance is successful or unsuccessful at this point. The peculiar condition of Bartleby as both child and ghost points to the fact that the scrivener occupies a unique position, both in the realm of the narrative and in the system embedded in it.

The Lawyer-Narrator and Collapses of Representative Power

Much like the binary system of synchrony and diachrony, Melville's narrator serves as an agent of meaning production. In his role as embodiment of unstable signifiers, Bartleby 'attacks' the narrator in his signifying power, but—as shown in the preceding sections—the suppression of this attack is already immanent. However, Bartleby challenges the lawyer-narrator's power in the course of the story through other means as well, the most prominent of which is the repeated usage of his enigmatic formula "I

would prefer not to.” Here, it is important to distinguish between two separate levels: that of the plot, in which Bartleby challenges the lawyer, and that of the narrative, which is obviously controlled by the narrator.

On the plot-level, the lawyer attempts to resist the power of the scrivener by substituting the impenetrable negating affirmation of Bartleby’s formula. In fact, he tries to challenge Bartleby’s “prefer not to” several times in a direct confrontation: First, he asks, “[y]ou *will* not?” (17) and later, desperately seeking resort in his authority, he exclaims, “[y]ou *must*” (26). His other attempt to erase the power of the formula attests even more to its devastating effect on the lawyer’s familiar system of meaning: “[I]t was generally understood that he would ‘prefer not to’ — in other words, that he would refuse point-blank” (18). This shows both the lawyer’s need to rationalize Bartleby’s behavior, and his inability to do so within Bartleby’s own system of reference. In the latter instance he momentarily (ab)uses the narratological power of his double function in the roles of plot character and narrator by seemingly rephrasing the scrivener’s words.

This attempt to replace the formula bears a lot of similarity with those instances where the lawyer applies what he calls his “doctrine of assumptions” (29). Indeed, he repeatedly performs thought processes designed to force the scrivener back into a representative framework. Andrew Knighton describes the lawyer’s strategy as follows:

The invocation of such a doctrine recasts the law in economic terms (given the reputation of economics as the ultimate science of assumption); Bartleby’s obstinance predictably perverts the rationality of this system as well, violating the sanctity of the work contract by riddling it with “the unheard-of exemptions” that formed its “tacit stipulations.” (193)

Whereas Knighton only describes how Bartleby inverts the rationality of the work contract and thus the legal relationship between lawyer and scrivener on the supply side, the same applies to the issue of consumption, as I will show in the section on demand. Deleuze explains the failure of the lawyer’s strategy of assumptions, which he actually recognizes himself at one point,⁷ with the fact that it “rest[s] on a logic of *presuppositions* according to which an employer ‘expects’ to be obeyed, or a kind friend listened to, whereas Bartleby has invented a new logic, a *logic of preference*, which is enough to undermine the presuppositions of language as a whole” (73).

7 “It was truly a beautiful thought to have assumed Bartleby’s departure; but, after all, that assumption was simply my own, and none of Bartleby’s. The great point was, not whether I had assumed that he would quit me, but whether he would prefer so to do. He was more a man of preferences than assumptions” (Melville 28).

Subtraction from Supply and Demand: Challenges to Economic Theory, Representational Power, and Systems of Reference in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

While I concur that the lawyer's strategy of assumptions fails in the face of Bartleby's behavior, this failure occurs only on the plot-level and can therefore only momentarily subsist. Nevertheless, I propose that—in contrast to the lawyer—the narrator is ultimately successful in subduing Bartleby's threatening potential. Arne De Boever comments on the narrator's reflection about his inability to produce a full account of the scrivener:

The prologue and epilogue suggest that we are dealing with a narration that is rethinking its own representative power. [...] [They] realize a kind of "unworking" of the narrator's work: Bartleby forces the narrator to forego the biography's promise of fullness and satisfaction and to emphasize instead its limitations. [...] As the chief character of the story, Bartleby challenges the authority of its narrator. (146-47)

In contrast to De Boever, I suggest that precisely by pointing out what seems to be Bartleby's unaccountability, the narrator remains victorious because he does in fact produce an account of at least one episode in the scrivener's life. Even more importantly, he chronicles Bartleby's death, which is arguably a condition he is in long before the narrator finds him lying on the ground of the prison yard. Hence, the whole story can be understood as the narrative of a dying scrivener—one that, in conjunction with Agamben, might have been born only for the sake of this story. Bartleby, it seems, has thus lost the narrator/character battle.

Bartleby's Space of Nonrepresentation: Supply

As the previous emphasis on the narrator's ultimate reassertion of representative power as well as my introductory remarks suggest, I do not entirely agree with the various constructions—implicit or explicit—of Bartleby as a figure of resistance. In part, my hesitation stems from the fact that any act of resistance implies a level of activity that the scrivener simply does not display. While resistance can very well be passive, what seems to be lacking here is any activity motivated by volition. As Deleuze notes, Bartleby displays "not a will to nothingness, but the growth of a nothingness of the will" (71). Also, it seems difficult to uphold the notion of resistance because the scrivener's nonwork cannot be equated with an outright refusal to work: "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 [...]. His practice exceeds the category of refusal" (Beverungen and Dunne 174). I recognize that Bartleby's peculiar ability to exceed "the category of refusal" holds a certain threatening potential to hegemonic power as is already implied in my reading of Bartleby in light of Agamben.

This ability lies in Bartleby's repeated formula. As Žižek points out, rather than negating something, Bartleby affirms, even though this affirmation is directed at nothing, or, at least, at something left unsaid: "This is how we pass 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" (393). No matter whether this "gesture of subtraction" (393) can be actualized or not—the fictional Bartleby certainly found a way to create a space of retraction. This section will then be concerned with the mechanism behind the production of said space.

From the beginning, Bartleby's nonrepresentational space seems to draw his surroundings into it: The office is located at "No. _ _ _ Wall Street" (4, 34, 35) and the tenant succeeding the lawyer is simply referred to as "Mr. B _ _" (35). These instances relate to the collapses of representative power mentioned above, and arise from Bartleby's usage of his singular formula. As Deleuze observes, Bartleby continues his work of copying with the seemingly incessant repetition of his "I would prefer not to"—only he produces a different result:

[T]he formula that successively refuses every other act has already engulfed the act of copying, which it no longer even needs to refuse. The formula is devastating because it eliminates the preferable just as mercilessly as any nonpreferred. It not only abolishes the term it refers to, and that it rejects, but also abolishes the other term it seemed to preserve, and that becomes impossible. In fact, it renders them indistinct: it hollows out an ever expanding zone of indiscernibility or indetermination between some nonpreferred activities and a preferable activity. All particularity, all reference is abolished. (71)

Deleuze thus emphasizes the other side of Žižek's 'coin': Bartleby's simultaneous negation and affirmation not only contains the creative power to open up a space outside the existing politico-economic system and its refusal but also proves destructive to the hegemonic system of reference.

An important part of the formula's power originates from the fact that Bartleby's associates—most notably the lawyer—are complicit in the creation of his space of nonrepresentation. Thus, the repetition of the formula creates an alternative, yet uncannily familiar mode of production in which the narrator and his employees are engaged from its very first utterance on:

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

Subtraction from Supply and Demand: Challenges to Economic Theory, Representational Power, and Systems of Reference in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

could assume; but in quite as clear a one came the previous reply, "I would prefer not to."

"Prefer not to," echoed I, rising in high excitement, and crossing the room with a stride. (11-12)

In fact, the lawyer already foreshadows the creation of this alternative mode of production when he repeats his request. Additionally, this scene shows that Bartleby's formula only works once it is "echoed," hence once the lawyer actively engages with it. Only after he repeats Bartleby's words, the lawyer rises "in high excitement"; he thus displays an affective⁸ impulse that appears to take over his body movements, whereas before he only "sat awhile in perfect silence" (12).

As indicated before, the lawyer's initial response of trying to replace the "prefer not to" proves unsuccessful. However, even after his attempts to force Bartleby's words into a familiar system of reference fail, the lawyer and his clerks keep on repeating—and therefore reproducing—the uncanny formula, as this conversation between Turkey and the lawyer shows:

"With submission, sir," said he, "yesterday I was thinking about Bartleby here, and I think that if he would but prefer to take a quart of good ale every day, it would do much towards mending him, and enabling him to assist in examining his papers."

"So you have got the word, too," said I, slightly excited.

"With submission, the word, sir?" asked Turkey, respectfully crowding himself into the contracted space behind the screen, and by so doing making me jostle the scrivener. "What word, sir?"

"I would prefer to be left alone here," said Bartleby, as if offended at being mobbed in his privacy.

"*That's* the word, Turkey," said I — "*that's* it."

"Oh, *prefer*? oh yes — queer word. I never use it myself. But, sir, as I was saying, if he would but prefer—"

"Turkey," interrupted I, "you will please withdraw."

"Oh certainly, sir, if you prefer that I should." (24)

Here again we see how the formula generates affect as the lawyer—normally "a man of peace" (6)—rudely interrupts Turkey. Unlike the lawyer, Turkey remains unaware of his using "the word," which spreads almost like a disease ("you have got the word,

8 I am using "affect" in distinction from "emotion," following Massumi. Steven Shaviro provides a useful summary of Massumi's categories in conjunction with the economic subject: "For Massumi, affect is primary, non-conscious, asubjective or presubjective, asignifying, unqualified and intensive; while emotion is derivative, conscious, qualified and meaningful[,] [...] [s]ubjects are overwhelmed and traversed by affect, but they *have* or *possess* their own emotions. Today, in the regime of neoliberal capitalism, we see ourselves as subjects precisely to the extent that we are autonomous economic units. [...] For such a subject, emotions are resources to invest, in the hope of gaining as large a return as possible" (Shaviro 3-4).

too”). In fact, the lawyer comes to see the formula as an overpowering force that he feels subjected to:

Somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word “prefer” upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. [...] [W]hat further and deeper aberration might it not yet produce? This apprehension had not been without efficacy in determining me to summary measures. (24)

We thus witness the overpowering effect of the formula on the lawyer. He becomes an involuntary market participant in Bartleby’s alternative universe of supply.

What Bartleby is supplying is therefore the creation of a space of nonrepresentation through the repetition of his formula. By ‘infecting’ his colleagues and the lawyer with “the word,” he ensures the preservation of this alternative space. The fact that his creation resists any form of nominal value assignment—such as a price—challenges the representative power of both the supply curve and the lawyer-narrator. Simultaneously, the uncanny resemblance to the familiar mode of production via the phrase’s repetition preserves a connection between Bartleby’s behavior and the economic sphere instead of completely abolishing it, therefore making the embedded critique even more powerful.

However, this assessment of Bartleby’s space of nonrepresentation does not necessarily mean that he succeeds in subverting the supply and demand model as a mechanism of meaning production. Conversely, the scrivener’s connection to Agamben’s unstable signifiers implies that his behavior actually serves to reaffirm the model’s signifying power. I suggest that this reaffirmation occurs through an inherent problem of the space of nonrepresentation, which will be made more clear in the following section addressing Bartleby’s complete withdrawal from consumption.

“Lives Without Dining”: The Withdrawal from the Demand Curve

Whereas Bartleby’s escape from the supply curve is enabled by productivity—albeit one that is not covered by traditional economic representations—his withdrawal from the demand-side is precisely that: a complete and utter withdrawal from consumption. Before examining Bartleby’s (non-)relationship to consumption, however, I will peruse the consumerism of the lawyer, Turkey, and Nippers. As will be shown, the way consumption is coded through these three characters provides an explanation of Bartleby’s need to refrain from it.

Unsurprisingly, the lawyer’s consumerism is an oppressive one. He perceives his clerks according to their usefulness to him and his business. When Bartleby still copies

Subtraction from Supply and Demand: Challenges to Economic Theory, Representational Power, and Systems of Reference in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

legal papers he is seen as "a valuable acquisition" (18); Turkey is likened to livestock;⁹ Nippers is "a very useful man" (8); Ginger Nut is named after his chief task, which is the procuring of the spicy cake that is not only a central object of consumption in the story, but arguably the source from which traditional labor originates in the Wall Street office. The employees are objects of consumption for the lawyer; more precisely, they are his investments. As such, the clerks are being put on both the demand and the supply curve by fulfilling the lawyer's demand for labor and enhancing the output of his business. Bartleby's withdrawal can thus be read as a strangely passive countermove designed to draw attention to the absurdity that lies in selling one's working power: With the goal to consume, we become objects of consumption ourselves.¹⁰

Moreover, Melville's "Story of Wall Street" presents (economic) consumption as harmful and threatening. Turkey and Nippers play a central role in the demonstration of its destructive nature. The lawyer gives both of them objects to consume, namely a coat and a table, which fulfill the same role as Turkey and Nippers themselves: They are investments, designed to increase the market value of the two clerks. This becomes especially apparent in the case of Turkey and the coat:

[Nippers] always dressed in a gentlemanly sort of way, and so, incidentally, reflected credit upon my chambers. Whereas, with respect to Turkey, I had much ado to keep him from being a reproach to me. His clothes were apt to look oily, and smell of eating houses. [...] His coats were execrable, his hat not to be handled. [...] Concerning his coats, I reasoned with him, but with no effect. (8)

The lawyer perceives Turkey's sordid appearance to have a direct, negative economic impact on his business. Therefore, the gift he presents Turkey with, "a highly respectable-looking coat of [his] own," is not motivated by charity, even though he thinks of his gift as a "favor" Turkey should be appreciative of (8). Rather, giving Turkey the coat is a straightforward investment decision. In fact, Turkey, who never wanted a new coat in the first place, is harmed by this investment spending which he is forced to wear. The coat has "a pernicious effect upon him — upon the same principle that too much oats are bad for horses. In fact precisely as a rash, restive horse is said to feel his oats, so Turkey felt his coat. It made him insolent. He was a man whom

9 In fact, he is compared to a "rash, restive horse" (8).

10 In this context, the etymology of consumption, and, more precisely, its dated usage to describe tuberculosis deserve some attention. *Schwindsucht*, a German word for tuberculosis, literally means the desire to disappear. Hence, it is telling that Bartleby is at one point mistaken for a "gentleman forger" (40), which leads the "grubman" (39) to mention Monroe Edwards, an actual forger who "died of consumption" (40). The fact that the lawyer describes Bartleby as "wasted" (40) when he finds his dead body also indicates tuberculosis. Although the connection to the German word is not explicitly given and might appear far-fetched, I find the idea of the pale scrivener dying from his desire to leave his dehumanizing economic environment comforting.

prosperity harmed” (8). The lawyer’s assessment that prosperity has a harmful effect on Turkey is part of the strategy of assumptions I discussed earlier. Turkey is, of course, not harmed by prosperity, but by the forced consumption of a product that reflects his own role vis-à-vis his employer: that of the investor as the subject and the invested-in object.

The same effect that Turkey suffers from the coat can be observed in Nippers’s relationship with the scrivener’s table. Even though the investment intention on the lawyer’s part is not as clearly stated as in the previous case, the table—which we can safely assume to have been provided by the lawyer—fulfills the same function as the coat:

Though of a very ingenious mechanical turn, Nippers could never get this table to suit him. He put chips under it, blocks of various sorts, bits of pasteboard, and at last went so far as to attempt an exquisite adjustment by final pieces of folded blotting paper. But no invention would answer. If, for the sake of easing his back, he brought the table lid at a sharp angle well up towards his chin, and wrote there like a man using the steep roof of a Dutch house for his desk, then he declared that it stopped the circulation in his arms. If now he lowered the table to his waistbands and stooped over it in writing, then there was a sore aching in his back. In short, the truth of the matter was Nippers knew not what he wanted. Or, if he wanted anything, it was to be rid of a scrivener’s table altogether. (7)

With his assessment of the situation at the end of the quotation, the lawyer hints at his employee’s aspiration to climb the social ladder. Already in the introduction to Nippers, the lawyer believes him to be “the victim of two evil powers — ambition and indigestion” (7). Yet, both Nippers’s and Turkey’s characters are deemed unsuitable for upward social mobility or improvements of their present economic situation. In Nippers’s case, the lawyer’s caricatural description of his employee’s struggle with the desk even makes Nippers’s “diseased ambition” (7) the object of ridicule. Unsurprisingly, Nippers’s revolt against the object reflecting the economic relationship with his employer is more violent than in Turkey’s case:

Nippers would sometimes impatiently rise from his seat, and, stooping over his table, spread his arms wide apart, seize the whole desk, and move it, and jerk it, with a grim, grinding motion on the floor, as if the table were a perverse voluntary agent, intent on thwarting and vexing him. (9)

As if conscious of his passive role as an object of consumption and a character upon which the lawyer exerts his narrative power, Nippers turns his hatred for the table into a performance of revolt. He also demonstrates the futility of such a resistance, as he is

Subtraction from Supply and Demand: Challenges to Economic Theory, Representational Power, and Systems of Reference in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

only able to unleash violence once the abstract economic relations—the cause of his suffering—are personified as an object.

Apart from the lawyer's investments, we are confronted with a second kind of harmful consumption in the Wall Street office. As the names of Turkey, Nippers,¹¹ and Ginger Nut already suggest, food intake plays a central role in the workings of the office: Turkey is a drunk and Nippers a victim of "indigestion." Hence, both have a relationship to food that causes them bodily harm and poses a danger to their economic status, because their inability to do competent work during one half of the day lowers their value as investments significantly. At the same time, however, the work they do perform seems to depend upon a very specific kind of food:

Copying law papers being proverbially a dry, husky sort of business, my two scriveners were fain to moisten their mouths very often with Spitzenbergs, to be had at the numerous stalls nigh the Custom House and Post Office. Also, they sent Ginger Nut very frequently for that peculiar cake — small, flat, round, and very spicy — after which he had been named by them. (9)

The paradox at hand is the fact that food appears to be the source from which the clerks derive their ability to work, but its consumption is harmful and dangerous to the economic welfare they are trying to attain through their work. Turkey's near-dismissal illustrates not only the dangerous nature of food consumption but also to what degree the ginger nut cakes are a part of his work process: "Of all the fiery afternoon blunders and flurried rashnesses of Turkey was his once moistening a ginger cake between his lips and clapping it on to a mortgage for a seal. I came within an ace of dismissing him then" (10). Work and the consumption of food thus merge to a point where they become almost synonymous. Indeed, the harmful nature of consumption—both of food and objects of investment—is inextricably linked to the copying of legal papers:

[Nippers's] indigestion seemed betokened in an occasional nervous testiness and grinning irritability, causing the teeth to audibly grind together over mistakes committed in copying; unnecessary maledictions, hissed rather than spoken, in the heat of business; and especially by a continual discontent with the height of the table where he worked. (7)

In light of the consequences of the employees' consumption, Bartleby's complete retreat from the demand curve becomes understandable. This withdrawal is most pronounced in his renouncement of food. The lawyer observes "that he never went to dinner; indeed, that he never went anywhere" (14). At the prison, Bartleby himself

11 "Nippers" refers, among others, to the claws of crabs and lobsters.

confirms that he is “unused to dinners” (39), and when the man hired to provide the scrivener with meals asks the lawyer if he lives “without dining” (40), the narrator confirms: “Lives without dining” (40). The fact that this peculiar phrase is uttered immediately after the lawyer’s discovery of Bartleby’s death points to the persistence of the scrivener’s half-dead condition throughout the major part of the story.

In addition, Bartleby is never described as eating anything,¹² nor having any kind of relation to objects of investment as is the case with Nippers and Turkey. Such a relationship is not possible any longer because he stops being an investment. In fact, the products designed to increase Nippers’s and Turkey’s production value cannot do the same with Bartleby, since he does not produce anything of traditional market value once he ceases to copy legal papers. Therefore, the scrivener renders the notion of economic investment meaningless.

The creation of Bartleby’s space of nonrepresentation thus rests on the subversion of a traditional mode of production, and undermining of a familiar system of reference. He accomplishes the latter through the tension between negation and affirmation generated by his “I would prefer not to,” as well as the simple, yet unimaginable, act of nonconsumption. This withdrawal from the demand curve becomes almost inevitable, considering the danger that consumption poses to the other characters, most notably Turkey and Nippers. They themselves are being coded as investments, making them entities that are represented on both the supply and demand curve. Their dehumanized condition is revealed to them via the forced consumption of other objects of investment, namely the coat and the table. Simultaneously, these objects also serve to manifest Turkey’s and Nippers’s economic status as employees. Thus, the table and the coat deny the workers any upward mobility, and hence their emancipation from the employer/employee relationship that turns the individuals into mere objects of consumption. The second, even more openly harmful, kind of consumption is that of food. Perhaps, the paradox of food consumption is best exemplified by the ginger nut: In addition to being a reminder of the degrading practice of regarding employees as objects of consumption, the ingestion of the spicy cake fuels the labor in the office, while also containing the risk of losing the employees’ working power.

Ultimately, regarding the realization of Bartleby’s “experiment,” his act of nonconsumption remains completely inconceivable. Even in a fictional world, this act is only possible because Bartleby contains a deficiency of life within himself from the

12 At one point, the lawyer hints at evidence that Bartleby occasionally consumes food: “He lives, then, on gingernuts, thought I; never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian, then; but no, he never eats even vegetables, he eats nothing but gingernuts” (15). Here again, we are witnesses of the lawyer’s strategy of assumptions.

Subtraction from Supply and Demand: Challenges to Economic Theory, Representational Power, and Systems of Reference in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

very beginning on. Thus, he does not rely on the life-sustaining component of food. Therefore, the space of nonrepresentation he withdraws into can only exist under conditions that are impossible to replicate.

CONCLUSION

"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" (Beverungen and Dunne 173). What Beverungen and Dunne suggest in this statement aptly demonstrates the difficulty of writing about Bartleby. While claiming that he is capable of defying any definition, they ascribe to Bartleby the meaning that is embedded in being part of a tradition of "truly brilliant literary character[s]." The problem at hand is that Bartleby appears to contain an infinite multitude of meanings, and that we can therefore never conclusively interpret him. Thus, it seems we should regard Bartleby the other way around: Because he proves irresistible to interpretation, he is the one who exercises force on us.

The variety of meanings he contains largely stems from the fact that he destabilizes a system of reference that is all too familiar to us. Therefore, in his position *outside* of a stable system of meaning, Bartleby occupies a space that we immediately feel the need to fill. Philosophers like Deleuze, Hardt, Negri, Žižek, as well as Agamben in his essay "Bartleby, or On Contingency" celebrate this unique space as a challenge to hegemonic power. However, Agamben's *own* theory of ghosts and children as unstable signifiers who ultimately affirm the binary system of meaning production leads to a different conclusion: In fact, Bartleby's uncanny role as both half-alive and half-dead ends up reestablishing the familiar order.

Equally, my own interpretations of Bartleby—as a challenger of economic theory and narrative power, and as both ghostlike and childlike destabilizer of meaning—are attempts to fill the empty space between the "prefer" and the "not" with meaning. The uncomfortable conclusion I draw from this is that I—like the majority of the authors mentioned in this paper—have acted much the same as the lawyer-narrator with his strategy of assumptions. Bartleby might exert an irresistible power over us, yet we certainly attempt to 'force him into a form' with every paper we produce about him.

Finally, the failure of Bartleby's challenge to hegemonic power might best be assessed by considering the relationship between Bartleby and the narrator. At first, it seems fairly obvious that the lawyer and his politics of assumptions are destined to fail. However, in his role as the narrator, he literally kills off the scrivener not only by describing his death, but by depicting the "incurably forlorn" (10) Bartleby as lacking

life and hope from the very first moment we meet him. Nevertheless, the fact that so many readings portray Bartleby as a hopeful figure who leads the way to resistance against authorities of all kind points to the fundamentally contradictory nature of the peculiar space he occupies and which I have tried to describe in this paper: A nature that constantly oscillates between a high degree of productivity and (self-)destruction. Melville's short story thus constantly creates a space beyond representation, only to demonstrate its impossibility.

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Subtraction from Supply and Demand: Challenges to Economic Theory, Representational Power, and Systems of Reference in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

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