Thinking Blue Marxism and the (Post)Human Red Writing

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6. Bartleby

The reading of literature is always also a reading of the world outside literature. Although it is common to make sense of literature as a special language and treat it as a uniquely aesthetic experience separate from daily life, such a canonic view of literature is especially ideological because of the way it suppresses consideration of the way literature is embedded in a society's signifying practices and participates in making sense of the dominant economic arrangements and how they should be understood and changed. Literature, in short, is never about itself; it is always about its outside, which is to say it is an extension of class relations. Even, or perhaps especially, when the outside is declared to be an illusion created by the inside and literature is read politically as having the power to change the real, this reading too is an ideological relay of class. Representing the social relations of production — which, I shall argue, offer the only radical understanding of materialism — as an effect of knowledge assumes that changes at the level of ideas drive history and not the class struggles over wealth. If there is anything 'singular' about literature this has more to do with the amount of resources a society possesses to devote to literary production and interpretation than it does with its 'autonomous potential'. Thus, reading literature becomes more than simply an act of appreciation or of decoding the discourses that surround it: it becomes a means to grasp how different classes narrate the class contradictions — and antagonisms — that are produced in the production relations.

To unpack my point that reading literature is always a reading of class, I will investigate the way Melville's 'Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street' has become a signpost in cultural theory for a 'new' politics of a 'new' capitalism without borders in which wealth and inequality are assumed to acquire 'materiality' in the circuits of exchange and thus invalidate the classical Marxist critique. Whether understood in terms of a 'refusal of work' (Negri), or as signifying a 'new' form of praxis of

a 'coming community' (e.g., Agamben, Žižek), contemporary readings of 'Bartleby' serve as a lexicon in which capitalism is represented as having outlived its basic contradiction inscribed in wage-labor/capital relations and therefore the best mode of 'resistance' to capitalism is the 'interrupting' of the flows of exchange value. Against what I shall argue are such accommodationist views — accommodationist in the sense that they all, no matter their surface differences, argue that the time for revolutionary change is over and thus accommodate the domination of finance capital — I propose to read 'Bartleby', along with some exemplary instances of its cyber-left readers, as providing an ideology of capitalism that limits resistance to the realm of circulation and instead will argue for the new not as cultural change in the terms of exploitation but the new as abolishing exploitation.

So let me begin by doing precisely what Bartleby does not, which is to say, give the material basis of his 'preferences' and, in a most unethical move, locate them beyond the immanence of his own discourse and outside the walls of Wall Street in the broader logic of capitalism. 'Bartleby, the Scrivener', let me state at the outset, is, at a time of intense class struggles between workers and owners — in the factories as well as on the streets — a text of middle class 'negotiation' between the interests of the bourgeoisie and the interests of the proletariat. Let me explain. On the one hand the story represents the figure of the worker — Bartleby — as primarily a subject of desire who, in refusing the authority of the lawyer in whose offices he is engaged and thus violating 'the natural expectancy of instant compliance' (12) which is the code of 'power', is criminalized, dies, and rises again as a martyr of 'passive resistance' (Melville 16). I will come back to this level of the story as it is central to contemporary readings. What I want to call attention to before I do so are the conditions of legibility of this narrative depicting the worker simultaneously as the subject of oppression and as the ethical model of an absolutely singular resistance, which exceeds and undermines the normative conventions of power by virtue of the worker's unnarrativizable desire. To be more precise, why is this story told by Melville — a story in which the pure instrumentality represented by the lawyer is shattered and the dominant relations of power troubled if not

¹ Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (New York: HarperCollins e-books, 2009).

reversed by the resistance of his subordinate, and in which the moral, logical, and social norms represented by the lawyer are thus shown to be groundless and his categorical 'ought' and 'must' wrecked on the stochastic logic of Bartleby's preference 'not to' — why does this story take place on Wall Street? Why is it indeed a 'Story of Wall Street'? And my argument here is not simply that the real 'secret' of Bartleby's refusal is how it represents capitalism as dependent on the desires of its subjects and thereby occults the economic logic of necessity that in actuality underlies the system — but that the story itself is simultaneously an encoding of the bourgeois economic theory that wealth is produced not on the scene of production but in the circuits of exchange. 'Wall Street', in Melville's tale, is, in other words, neither merely a 'topical' signifier nor a thematic one — it is indeed the ideological foundation upon which the story posits that what is at stake in the relation between the owners and the workers is not 'exploitation' but 'oppression' — it is, in other words, the exemplary signifier of the dematerialization of the relations of production and the class analytic to which it gives rise.

All contemporary readings of 'Bartleby', if not explicitly marxist, put themselves forward as materialist readings. Whether as in Derrida's reading of 'Bartleby' materiality is made synonymous with an ethics of indeterminacy, or whether materiality is contained to the surface of the social as in Negri (*Empire*) and Žižek's readings (*The Parallax View*), where materiality becomes a matter of the performative inversions of power or of ideology, contemporary readers of 'Bartleby' display an underlying ideological sameness in the way they follow Melville's lead and erase production as the zone of the creation of wealth, foregrounding instead the scene of power and the resistance of the singular negation. While they differ in their local understandings of the 'material', they all focus on the slogan of 'I prefer not to' as if it offers a materialist disruption or subversion of the 'logic of capital'. This is, in other words, a 'material' that installs the singular 'desire' — the unexplained and groundless 'preference not to' — as the 'new' mode of resistance in a highly advanced stage of finance capital located in the metropole. (And of course I put 'new' in quotation marks here because, as I have indicated, it is not at all 'new' — it is simply that the ideological languages in which the social relations are narrated need constantly to be updated and revised.) As I have already suggested, 'I prefer not to' is in actuality part of the logic of capital because just as the fiction of Wall Street as the zone of creation of value forms part of its ideological structure, so too does 'resistance' at the secondary level of the cultural — whether conceived as discourse, ideology, power, or consumption, belong to its episteme. These moves of course all focus on emptying out materialism of history and class and making it into a 'language game'. On behalf of finance capital, the 'new' materialisms all negate locating the source of wealth in the exploitation of the worker — that is 'surplus value' as the real material core of capital — and resignify materiality as locally different codifications of ethics. Of the new materialisms, I will briefly rehearse two of the most influential: Hardt and Negri's desire-al materialism and Žižek's materialism of the Real.

Hardt and Negri argue that although Bartleby's refusal 'in itself is empty' and 'completely solitary' it is also a 'refusal of work' and as such 'is certainly the beginning of liberatory politics', that needs only be supplemented with a 'real alternative', which they locate in the socalled 'immaterial labor' — labor, that is, which is engaged in the sphere of circulation — service and other forms of 'emotional labor' — of the high-tech workforce.² The assumption here is that 'work', having become primarily a cognitive matter, is ripe for transformation through voluntary acts of subjective refusal that move one out of the realm of material compulsion into an emotionally liberated community without it being necessary to address the structural relations of private property within which work takes place — a displacement that ensures that what is foreclosed as a 'real alternative' is the overthrowing of private property. I leave aside here that the coding of 'non-work' as a 'radical refusal' is itself nothing but a codification of the position of the middle class subjects of the North who are, in the context of the current shift of productive labor to the global South, precisely finding themselves in the 'liberated' position of being jobless. Theirs is an activist materialism that wants to resignify materiality in terms of desire by displacing the logic of necessity in class society with voluntarism.

By contrast, Žižek's reading of 'Bartleby' is put forward as a critique of Hardt and Negri's reading on the basis of reactivating 'dialectical

² Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Empire (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 204.

materialism' as 'the philosophical underpinning of Marxism'.³ He argues that their view is 'precisely [...] the conclusion to be avoided' as

in its political mode, Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to' is *not* the starting point of 'abstract negation' which should then be overcome in the patient positive work of the 'determinate negation' of the existing social universe, but a kind of *arche*, the underlying principle that sustains the entire movement.⁴

For Žižek, capitalism now commodifies all acts, and especially the 'activist' logic that Hardt and Negri exemplify, insofar as they assume that a 'real alternative' can be produced through a positive transformation of the existing. Leaving aside for the moment whether Hardt and Negri actually posit the transformation of capital, at issue here is that, according to Žižek, the only radical act is therefore the act of refusing to act. Thus he writes, Bartleby's 'refusal is not so much the refusal of a determinate content as, rather the formal gesture of refusal as such [...] that stands for the collapse of the symbolic order'. It is in fact this (empty) form of the Refusal that underlies all refusals which renders Bartleby's 'presence so unbearable' to capital, according to Žižek. Éžižek's 'materialism' therefore posits a neo-Hegelian 'absolute negativity' as the really radical resistance capable of producing the new. Yet while Žižek distances himself from Negri and Hardt as a 'dialectical materialist' he not only reproduces their circulationist logic but articulates it in a form which is in fact beneficial for the strongest fractions of capital. Take for instance Žižek's validation of Karatani's privileging of consumption as the axis of transformation now. For Žižek, following Karatani for whom 'surplus value is realized in principle only by workers in totality buying back what they produce', it is also consumption which 'provides the key leverage from which to oppose the rule of capital today [... as] that unique point at which [proletarians] approach capital from the position of a buyer, and, consequently, at which it is capital that is forced to court them'.7 In other words, the real space of resistance according to Žižek, lies in workers refusing to buy what they have produced and thus

³ Slavoj Žižek, The Parallax View (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), p. 4.

⁴ Ibid., p. 382.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 384-85.

⁶ Ibid., p. 385.

⁷ Ibid., p. 53.

realizing surplus value for the capitalist. I leave aside that regardless of whether or not surplus value is 'realized' in the circuits of consumption, it has already been extracted at the level of production and that thus materially prior to the sphere of circulation is the fact that the worker is already exploited in the production relations and it is this theft of her unpaid surplus labor that all consumptionist models of resistance work to occlude. In fact, in advancing an economics of 'collapse' at the level of the non-realization of surplus value, Žižek simply upholds the interests of the strongest fractions of big business which have always seen such crises of overproduction not as 'negations' of capital — but as negations of the weakest capitals which are then absorbed by the larger and most productive monopoly capitals.

What is put forth as materialism now are 'surface' readings that propose to find a basis of change in the strange form of Bartleby's refusal ('I prefer not to'), in other words, in the local everyday dissatisfactions and negations that challenge cultural norms, on the assumption that there is no outside basis for the ideology critique of culture and all we can do is await a 'coming community' (Agamben). They thereby abandon a structural analysis of capitalism that reveals its fundamental contradiction in the realm of production and not circulation (which is the sphere of exchange and consumption of commodities). 'I prefer not to' does not disrupt the logic of capital, which is based not on the law of compulsory consumption, but on the economic compulsion on workers to sell their labor power to the capitalists and thus provide the material basis for capital: the extraction of surplus value in commodity production.