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The Poetics of Refusal: Bartleby's Language and the Violence of Signification in "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

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Abstract

In "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Herman Melville presents a character whose passive refusal, encapsulated in the repeated phrase "I would prefer not to," challenges power, agency, and social norms. This essay examines how Bartleby's refrain acts as both an assertion of autonomy and a critique of the violence inherent in language. By rejecting his employer's commands, Bartleby disrupts the rational, efficiency-driven logic of the workplace, exposing the violence embedded in linguistic norms. Slavoj Žižek's concept of language as inherently violent—through its imposition of norms and standards—illuminates how Bartleby's refusal goes beyond protest, creating a space of resistance that defies interpretation and subverts power dynamics. Bartleby's language, neither a clear denial nor an expression of desire, becomes a radical negation that questions the very nature of meaning. Ultimately, Bartleby's refusal does not propose a new order but disrupts the structures of meaning and authority, forcing us to confront the limits of language itself.

Keywords: *Bartleby, Herman Melville, Slavoj Žižek, violence, language, signification*

Introduction

Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) tells the story of a lawyer who hires Bartleby, a scrivener, to work in his office. Initially diligent, Bartleby begins to repeatedly refuse tasks with the phrase "I would prefer not to," gradually intensifying his subtle rebellion. As his defiance grows, the lawyer is forced to confront the limits of his authority and the dehumanizing nature of institutional life, ultimately abandoning Bartleby to a life of isolation. The story presents one of literature's most enigmatic characters, whose refusal has sparked debates on themes ranging from existential rebellion to passive resistance.

The narrator, a seasoned lawyer committed to logic, reason, and the law, operates in an environment where language enforces authority. His scriveners diligently copy legal documents, reflecting the rigid structure of the legal system. Bartleby's refusal disrupts this order, challenging both office protocols and societal expectations. The lawyer's failed attempts to rationalize Bartleby's resistance reveal the limitations of logic and expose how institutional roles dehumanize individuals. Furthermore, Bartleby's withdrawal highlights the underlying violence in communication. The narrator's repeated efforts to control Bartleby only emphasize his inability to manage these forces.

This essay examines how Bartleby's refrain acts as both an assertion of autonomy and a critique of the violence inherent in language. By rejecting his employer's commands, Bartleby disrupts the rational, efficiency-driven logic of the workplace, exposing the

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violence embedded in linguistic norms. Slavoj Žižek's concept of language as inherently violent—through its imposition of norms and standards—illuminates how Bartleby's refusal goes beyond protest, creating a space of resistance that defies interpretation and subverts power dynamics. Bartleby's language, neither a clear denial nor an expression of desire, becomes a radical negation that questions the very nature of meaning. Ultimately, Bartleby's refusal does not propose a new order but disrupts the structures of meaning and authority, forcing us to confront the limits of language itself.

It is worth noting that the story has captivated theorists and cultural critics for years, among them Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Derrida, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and Slavoj Žižek. [2] Written in 1853, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" continues to resonate today, presciently addressing issues like the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement and the global COVID-19 lockdowns.[3] Its enduring significance underscores the persistent relevance of Melville's work in the contemporary world.

Bartleby's Words and the Violence of Language

Before Bartleby arrives in the office, the narrator manages to run his business smoothly, despite occasional issues with his two scriveners—such as old age or indigestion—that temporarily affect their efficiency. The narrator also emphasizes the importance of naming, underscoring the connection between words and the things they represent. The names of his three employees—Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger-Nut—serve as fitting labels, with each nickname perfectly corresponding to the traits or behaviors they embody. These names highlight the correspondence between identity and function. The office, as depicted, operates with a sense of economic efficiency, and the success of the business is deeply tied to the rational use of language.

> Everything operates seamlessly until Bartleby arrives, challenging the established assumptions and social values. Initially, Bartleby appears to be a competent and helpful new scrivener. However, on the third day of his employment, when the narrator asks him to proofread a document alongside his colleagues, Bartleby responds 'in a singularly mild, firm voice,' saying, 'I would prefer not to' (165). For the narrator, who is accustomed to the 'haste and natural expectancy of instant compliance,' this response is both absurd and unacceptable. So surprising is Bartleby's answer that the narrator cannot believe his ears.
>
> I sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying my stunned faculties. Immediately it occurred to me that my ears had deceived me, or Bartleby had entirely misunderstood my meaning. I repeated my request in the clearest tone I could assume. But in quite as clear a one came the previous reply, 'I would prefer not to.'
>
> 'Prefer not to,' echoed I, rising in high excitement, and crossing the room with a stride. 'What do you mean? Are you moon-struck? I want you to help me compare this sheet here—take it,' and I thrust it towards him.
>
> 'I would prefer not to,' said he. (165–66)

[2] For a more in-depth analysis of these theorists' interpretations of "Bartleby, the Scrivener," see Kevin Attell's "Language and Labor, Silence and Stasis: Bartleby among the Philosophers" (2013). Additionally, read the chapter on "Bartleby" in Lea Bertani Vozar Newman's *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Herman Melville* (1986), pp. 19-78.

[3] For more details, read Lauren Klein's "What Bartleby Can Teach Us About Occupy Wall Street" (2011); Regina Dilgen's "The Original Occupy Wall Street: Melville's 'Bartleby, the Scrivener"'(2012); Roberta Bienvenu's "Bartleby the Scrivener Occupies Wall Street"(2013); Lee Edelman's "Occupy Wall Street: 'Bartleby' (2013); Russ Castronovo's "Occupy Bartleby" (2014); Mary Eyring's "Bartleby's Insights on Complex Embodiment for a Post-pandemic World" (2024).

The lawyer assumes that anyone in his office who is not "moon-struck" will simply comply with his orders and immediately attend to his requests. Strictly speaking, the narrator is not posing a question, nor is Bartleby in a position to make choices. As an employer, the narrator merely "state[d] what it was [he] wanted him [Bartleby] to do" (165). Any disobedience, in this context, is perceived as perverse or pathological—an excess or violation of social norms. Bartleby's response, "I would prefer not to," functions like a short-circuit in an otherwise efficient network, where the workplace hierarchy dictates how individuals speak and behave. To secure a job and a place in society, one's speech and actions must adhere to established rules and expectations.

With a mixture of confusion and indignation, the narrator attempts to clarify his order, still hoping to resolve the conflict through verbal communication—but to no avail. His next move is to approach Bartleby and "thrust" the paper toward him, as if attempting to force him to comply. The word "thrust"—to push, press, or drive with force—carries violent connotations. The inadequacy of Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" in this context, and the violent response it provokes, compel us to reconsider the social norms and rational language we typically take for granted.

The medium through which the narrator communicates, issues orders, and engages in argumentation—language itself—reveals itself to be inherently violent. Language, often regarded as the fundamental tool for renouncing violence, promoting understanding, and fostering mutual recognition, is, in fact, deeply entangled in a system of violence that operates at both visible and invisible levels. Slavoj Žižek offers a compelling argument that language is not merely a neutral medium but is implicated in an "unconditional violence" that permeates our interactions. In his *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Žižek notes that the very act of perceiving something as violent relies on a presupposed standard of what is understood as "normal" or "non-violent." This idea hinges on the concept that violence can only be recognized in relation to a contrasting norm. He writes, "When we perceive something as an act of violence, we measure it by a presupposed standard of what the 'normal' non-violent situation is—and the highest form of violence is the imposition of this standard with reference to which some events appear as 'violent'" (64).

In other words, by establishing what is "normal" or "non-violent," we create a framework within which actions, behaviors, and even words are classified as either conforming to this standard or deviating from it. In this context, labeling something as "violent" constitutes a form of violence itself, as it enforces a restrictive system of meaning that imposes an arbitrary dichotomy between what is acceptable and what is not. This imposition of a normative structure is neither neutral nor benign; it is inherently coercive and violent.

Žižek's argument hinges on the notion that the structure of language and the act of defining violence within it are always situated in relation to an imagined, idealized state of non-violence. This non-violence, in turn, becomes the benchmark by which everything else is measured. However, in seeking to delineate what is violent, the act of defining it through comparison to non-violence is, paradoxically, itself a form of violence. Non-violence is not simply the absence of violence; rather, it is a presupposed, predefined standard that, by its very existence, erases the possibility of recognizing or engaging with violence in more complex or nuanced ways. Non-violence, as a conceptual ideal, becomes a tool of violence, reinforcing social hierarchies and power structures under the guise of maintaining order and harmony.

In a sense, the very categorization of violence as something deviant or excessive relies on an ideological construction of normalcy that is itself violent. It is the imposition of this

supposed standard of "normalcy"—a norm that is never fully accessible or unproblematic—that shapes the experience of violence in ways that can be deeply damaging. When we ask what violence is, we are already assuming a clear line between violent and non-violent actions. Yet, Žižek suggests that this division is artificial and problematic. The process of categorization and comparison that underpins the language of violence produces its own form of violence by simplifying complex situations into easily digestible binaries that serve the interests of those who hold the power to define and label.

This insight reveals a paradox that lies at the heart of the relationship between language and violence: the act of renouncing or negating violence through language may end up reproducing the very structures of violence it aims to dismantle. This brings us to the troubling question raised by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1921–22): "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (as cited in Pinker, 2007, p. 134). If language shapes our perception of reality and serves as the foundation for how we understand the world, then the limits of what we can say—the way we construct meaning, define relationships, and categorize experiences—determine the boundaries of what we can know, feel, and change. In this context, if language is the medium through which we engage with and shape the world, how can we possibly eliminate the violence inherent in it without merely reproducing those same dynamics of power and coercion?

This leads to a further complication: How can we engage in a process of undoing the violence of language? Can we "torture" the word itself, rip it from its conventional references, and allow it to lose its violent connotations? If negation—the act of saying "no" to violence—is itself a form of violence, can we escape the trap of language altogether, or is there no way out? Wittgenstein's philosophy suggests that once we recognize the limitations of language, we face a fundamental dilemma. Language, by its very structure, limits and frames our world, and yet we are bound to it. The very tools we might use to critique language are enmeshed in its system. Is it possible to step outside the logic of language in such a way that we no longer reproduce violence in our resistance to it? Can we truly escape the conditions that language imposes upon us, or must we learn to live within its constraints, recognizing that language always involves a degree of violence in its imposition of meaning?

This tension—the desire to escape violence while remaining within the very structures that produce it—forms a core dilemma in understanding the role of language in shaping human experience. The attempt to overcome language's violence, without merely shifting it or replacing one violent form with another, leads us into an impasse. In the quest to eliminate the violence of language, we must grapple with the paradox that language itself, in all its forms, is a battlefield—a place where the limits of our understanding, our capacity for empathy, and our ability to negotiate conflict are continually tested. Ultimately, it may be that language, as Žižek suggests, is never neutral, never simply a tool for communication, but always implicated in the violent dynamics of power and representation that shape our world. And yet, it remains the only means through which we can attempt to express the very problem of violence itself.

The Power of "I Would Prefer Not To"

An analysis of Bartleby's unusual and obsessive relationship to language can offer new insights into these questions. As a scrivener—a mere copier of legal documents—Bartleby does not possess his own language, nor is he required to, since, as the narrator defines it, the copyist's role is merely "an unwarrantable usurpation of strictly professional affairs,

such as the original drawing up of legal documents" (160). As a scrivener, Bartleby rarely speaks; he works mechanically, functioning as a small cog in the larger machinery of law and society. The situation shifts, however, when Bartleby begins to use "I would prefer not to" as his invariable response to every request. This phrase—barely even an answer—works against its context, subverting the very function it is meant to serve. With each repetition, "I would prefer not to" gains an inexplicable power, becoming increasingly compelling and irresistible. Bartleby's persistent, almost incantatory response subtly permeates the daily language of the narrator and his colleagues. At this point, Bartleby ceases to perform his job as a scrivener—he no longer copies anything. The roles have reversed: Bartleby's words, once mere echoes of legal discourse, now serve as the original, inadvertently echoed by others. In this way, Bartleby ceases to be a mere scrivener, while the other individuals, in a sense, become unwitting copyists of his language.

Given that Bartleby appears to be the least violent and least ambitious character in the story, the question arises: where does his power come from? There is a certain politeness in his words ("would"), and he refrains from bluntly refusing by saying, "I will not do that." In one of their exchanges, the narrator attempts to correct Bartleby's phrasing, but Bartleby insists that it is not "he will not," but rather "he prefers not to": "'I would prefer not to.' 'You will not?' 'I prefer not'" (125). This response neither demands nor expresses desire. However, his apparent politeness is illusory. Bartleby refuses to provide the kind of submissive, socially expected reply, such as "Could you please excuse me from this task because… (and provide an acceptable reason)."

In contrast, Turkey once declines the narrator's request to lighten his workload, justifying his disobedience by claiming his service is indispensable and attributing his mistakes—such as dropping blots—to his old age. He appeals to the narrator's "fellow feeling," reminding him that they are both aging. Like Bartleby, Turkey rejects a request from his superior, but unlike Bartleby, he tries to make his refusal socially acceptable by offering an explanation. Turkey also habitually uses humble language, such as "with submission," in his responses. Clearly, Turkey's refusal still operates within the hierarchical structure of the workplace. This mode of communication proves effective, as the narrator admits that Turkey's appeal to his sense of sympathy is nearly impossible to resist.

As Turkey observes, the word "prefer" is a "queer word" (135). This word subverts the power dynamics inherent in the conversation, transforming the lawyer's somewhat obligatory order into a matter of personal choice. By using "prefer," the speaker positions himself within a discursive space where he appears to have the freedom to make a decision. In this way, the act of speaking itself creates a new, alternative site of utterance. Bartleby's response is deliberately elusive and difficult to interpret—it is neither clearly positive nor negative, since he does not say "I want" or "I do not want." By saying "I would prefer not to," he offers an answer that transcends the conventional responses expected of him in this social and cultural context. This "preference" is ambiguous, as it does not specify what he prefers; rather, it expresses a preference not to do something. As Žižek notes in *The Parallax View*, this form of negation challenges the very nature of preference itself.

> In his refusal of the Master's order, Bartleby does not negate the predicate; rather, he affirms a non-predicate: he does not say that he doesn't want to do it; he says that he prefers (wants) not to do it.[4] 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. (381–82)

[4] Žižek owes this insightful observation to Alenka Zupančič. See his note 82 (p. 429).

Although he uses language to express his refusal, Bartleby's response does not emerge from a conventional site of negation. His preference is not grounded in any reasoning or elaboration, pushing the logic of "preference" to its extreme. As the narrator later acknowledges, Bartleby "was more a man of preferences than assumptions" (138). In this sense, his preference follows no justifications or explanations, but instead subverts the very framework within which preferences are typically understood.

"I would prefer not to" invites multiple interpretations. Bartleby may prefer not to help the narrator proofread the documents, not to be interrupted while copying, not to perform his duties as a scrivener, not to answer questions, not to respond as expected, or not to submit to the authority imposed upon him. However, he refuses to clarify exactly what he prefers not to do. The sentence remains suspended because the object of his preference is left undecided: he might prefer not to do something specific, or, more likely, he simply prefers the "not to" itself. Unlike a typical signifier, which points to something external, "I would prefer not to" repeats itself (much like Bartleby's monotonous work of copying and transcribing), reverberating and spinning in on itself until it ultimately loses all reference.

Speech act theory offers valuable insight into the nature of Bartleby's words as a unique form of signifier. J. L. Austin argues that an utterance does not merely "say" something but performs a specific kind of action—saying something is itself a form of doing. Most of the language used by the lawyer and his scriveners is composed of speech acts. The lawyer's orders and the scriveners' compliant responses are typically aimed at prompting certain actions. But what about Bartleby's language in terms of performative utterances? What is the relationship between the act of saying and the act of doing in his repeated "I would prefer not to"? Branka Arsić explores this performative dimension of language in Melville's writings:

> For if 'to speak' is to do something (as many of Melville's characters and narrators suggest), then speaking is less related to the 'meaning' of words than the very fact that it is an 'activity' of language. By speaking we do not therefore so much do things with words as let the words 'do themselves' as things. (134)

In a sense, the issue is not so much about "how to do things with words," but rather "how words do things themselves." The signifier, in this case, does not serve to designate things or classify the world, because it is not a name that points to specific objects. So, what kind of action does Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" produce? Not much—perhaps nearly nothing. Bartleby's language can thus be seen as a residue left behind after speech has been severed from its meaning and reference, or when the signifier is detached from its signified. Arsić explores the essential detachment in Bartleby's language as follows:

> … there is speaking, but speech does not 'act,' and so language for its part remains enclosed in itself, somewhat like a private language. Language itself is now turned into a passive being, even though it continues to speak. This is not only to say that it does not refer to anything outside itself but that it has lost the capacity to refer to itself. (141)

Bartleby's non-referential language creates a separation between words and actions. "I would prefer not to" disconnects words from things by turning itself into an object—an utterance that becomes a thing in itself. In doing so, it nullifies all reference and particularity. As the narrator observes, "Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable" (109), including his speech. Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" occupies a unique space: always suspended, always in repose, and always distanced. It generates a vacuum, a void within the linguistic realm.

The Politics of Refusal

The old lawyer observes, "[n]othing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance" (123), yet Bartleby's repeated refrain, "I would prefer not to," transcends mere passivity. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri identify Bartleby as a key figure embodying "the absoluteness of the refusal" to authority (203). His refusal achieves its absoluteness precisely because it is so "indefinite." Throughout the story, Bartleby's motives remain elusive, and his actions defy interpretation. He is obstinate and unyielding, yet neither violent nor emotionally charged. He harms no one and reveals no discernible human emotion or desire. Instead, he remains impassive, "a fixture" in the lawyer's office, occupying a corner and mechanically repeating his five-word statement (136). While working, he writes with mechanical precision, devoid of agency or intention, as though detached from any sense of self or purpose.

It is precisely this absence of typical human traits that shields Bartleby from immediate violence. As the narrator reflects,

> I looked at him steadfastly. His face was leanly composed; his gray eye dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience, or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. (120)

Had Bartleby exhibited the traits of rudeness, impatience, or disrespect, the lawyer would likely have responded with force, either through physical violence or, at the very least, violent language, in order to reassert his authority. As the narrator confesses, "With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously from my presence" (121). However, Bartleby's dispassionate, almost non-human demeanor compels the narrator to grapple with his refusal in its purest, most elemental form, devoid of the emotional triggers that would otherwise provoke a more conventional response.

Hardt and Negri contend that Bartleby's refusal represents "the beginning of liberatory politics," suggesting that his absolute negation points to a possibility of creating a new social order. In their reading, Bartleby's physical death in the story becomes a tragic symbol of the limits of pure negation—his existence, they argue, "hangs on the edge of an abyss" and "continuously treads on the verge of suicide" (204). For them, Bartleby's refusal is not a final gesture but a beginning. After refusal, they claim, comes the necessity of constructing a new social body, a positive project that extends beyond mere rejection. In this sense, Bartleby's act can be interpreted as either a hopeful or tragic precursor to a new form of community, depending on whether his refusal leads to self-destruction or sparks the creation of a new world.

However, this interpretation arguably misapprehends the essential nature of Bartleby's refusal. Bartleby's gesture does not simply stand as the negation of something else, nor does it open the door to a new and liberatory social order. Rather, his refusal represents a pure form of negativity that does not propose a dialectical alternative but instead refuses all meaning, representation, and resolution.

In both Hardt/Negri and Žižek's readings, Bartleby stands for negativity, what lies differently is "the role of negativity" in the "models of resistance and refusal." As Kevin Attell's puts it,

> Bartleby, for Hardt and Negri, does not make it to the last stage because he is stuck in negativity—he *is* negativity—for which there is no clear place in the immanent collective praxis of the multitude, which has more or less overcome the dialectic and entered into a new

> absolute space that … would be postpolitical. But for Zizek, not only is this beatific vision symptomatic of a current line of leftist thinking that, he argues, is animated by a tacit acceptance of the victory of capital and renunciation of oppositional (that is, class) politics, but it implicitly operates on an immanentist ontology of an absolute that has purified itself of the negative.
>
> By contrast, Zizek argues for an ontology of irreducible negativity, the fundamental level of which, in Zizek's Lacanian terminology, is called the 'Real,' which he glosses as 'not the inaccessible Thing, but the *gap* which prevents our access to it, the 'rock' of the antagonism which distorts our view of the perceived object through a partial perspective… the very gap, passage, which separates one perspective from another, the gap (in this case: social antagonism) which makes the two perspective radically *incommensurable*.' (220) [5]

In this sense, Bartleby's refusal does not become the opposite of what it negates, but instead operates as an empty space—a gap, a void. As Deleuze observes, Bartleby's refusal is "a negativism beyond all negation" (71).

Bartleby's repeated refrain—"I would prefer not to"—becomes, in this light, an act of pure signification that disrupts the very act of signifying. His words, in their repetitive simplicity, hollow out their own content. They do not serve as a rejection of any specific authority, order, or set of expectations, nor do they demand that something else take their place. Rather, they create a space of resistance to meaning, becoming what Žižek calls a "signifier-turned-object" (385) in *The Parallax View*—a linguistic object that disrupts the symbolic order by refusing to function as a meaningful unit within that order. The significance of Bartleby's words lies not in their opposition to something else but in their refusal to be subsumed into the economy of meaning altogether.

In a sense, Bartleby's words, "I would prefer not to," become like the dead letters he once handled—documents that are written but that fail to reach their intended destination.

These letters lack meaning or intention, mirroring how Bartleby's words resist carrying any clear messages or being translated into action or interpretation. Like the dead letters, they defy authoritative meaning and the framework of rational discourse.

The key to understanding Bartleby's refusal lies in its absolute indeterminacy. His refusal does not simply negate one form of authority in favor of another; rather, it embodies a withdrawal from the very process of signification and representation itself. Bartleby does not provide us with a clear rationale for his actions, nor does he invest his refusal with any emotional depth or moral conviction. His "I would prefer not to" is not a reasoned argument but a pure act of non-engagement, a refusal to participate in the system of communication, work, or institutional life that the narrator represents.

Bartleby's refusal, therefore, functions not as a critique that leads to clarity or resolution but as a radical disruption of the structures of power and language. In the face of this disruption, the narrator, and by extension the reader, are forced to confront the inherent limitations of their own interpretative frameworks. Bartleby's words are empty of content, and his refusal offers no clear moral or political direction. Instead, his act serves as a profound commentary on the incapacity of language and institutional structures to fully capture or control human subjectivity. The final act of Bartleby's death, far from signaling the conclusion of a liberatory project, underscores the tragic impossibility of finding resolution within the framework of language and institutional life. Bartleby's refusal does

[5] Žižek, *The Parallex View*, 281. Emphases in original. For an in-depth discussion of Hardt and Negri's versus Žižek's interpretations of "Bartleby," refer to Kevin Attell's "Language and Labor, Silence and Stasis: Bartleby Among the Philosophers" (2013).

not open up a new horizon of possibility; it simply reveals the profound limitations of the systems that attempt to control or interpret him.

In conclusion, to interpret Bartleby's refusal as the beginning of a liberatory politics or as a precursor to a new social order risks misunderstanding the depth of his act. His refusal is not a step toward something new but an exploration of the limits of meaning, language, and institutional authority. His refusal is not a call for liberation but a reminder of the existential void that lies at the heart of communication and social existence. In this way, Bartleby's act remains an enduring mystery—an enigmatic refusal that resists interpretation and disrupts the very foundations of meaning, language, and power.

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