

On Gisèle Berkman's *L'Effet Bartleby. Philosophes lecteurs*

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Genealogy of the (French) philosophers fascinated ("effected") by the figure of Bartleby

Blanchot 1975, 1980 (*The Writing of the Disaster*)

→ Derrida 1976 ("Pas"), 1990 (*The Gift of Death*), 1991 (*Resistances*)

→ Deleuze 1989 → Agamben 1993 → Badiou 2006

→ Rancière 1998 (Negri 2000, 2004 Zizek 2008)

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Quotations or summaries of texts mentioned (and not mentioned)

Blanchot (1946)

- But if we recall Bartleby the scrivener's words, setting against his master's every request this response, "I would prefer not to," we feel that speech here has the privilege of silence. To be quiet is not always the best way of being quiet. That is the reason that Pascal asserted that silence also is impure. (WF62/PF67)

→ Blanchot (1975, 1980)

- Refusal is said to be the first degree of passivity. But if refusal is deliberate and voluntary, if it expresses a decision – though this be a negative one – it does not yet allow separation from the power of consciousness, and comes no closer to passivity than this act, of refusal, on the part of a self. And yet refusal does tend toward the absolute, independent of any determination whatsoever. This is the core of refusal which Bartleby the scrivener's inexorable "I would prefer not to" expresses: an abstention which has never had to be decided upon, which precedes all decisions and which is not so much a denial as, more than that, an abdication. Bartleby gives up (not that he ever pronounces, or clarifies this renunciation)

ever saying anything; he gives up the authority to speak. This abnegation understood as the abandonment of the self, a relinquishment of identity, refusal which does not cleave to refusal but opens to failure, to the loss of being, to thought. “I will not do it” would still have signified an energetic determination, calling forth an equally energetic contradiction. “I would prefer not to...” belongs to the infiniteness of patience; no dialectical intervention can take hold of such passivity. We have fallen out of being, outside where, immobile, proceeding with a slow and even step, destroyed men come and go. (WD17/ED 33)

- What Kafka gives us – the gift we do not receive – is a sort of combat through literature for literature: a struggle which is – and is at the same time escaped by – its aim. It is so different from what we know by the name “combat” or by any other name, that even the term “unknown” does not suffice to make it perceptible to us, since it is as familiar as it is strange to us. “Bartleby the Scrivener” belongs to the same combat, inasmuch as his “preference not to” has none of the simplicity of a refusal. (141/213)

- In “Bartleby”, the enigma comes from “pure” writing, which can only be that of a copyist (rewriting). The enigma comes from the passivity into which this activity (writing) disappears, and which passes imperceptibly and suddenly from ordinary passivity (reproduction), to the beyond of all passiveness: to a life so passive – for it has the hidden decency of dying – that it does not have death for an ultimate escape, nor does it make death an escape. Bartleby copies; he writes incessantly, and cannot stop long enough to submit to anything resembling control. *I would prefer not to.* This sentence speaks in the intimacy of our nights: negative preference, the negation that effaces preference and is effaced therein: the neutrality of that which is not among the things there are to do – the restraint, the gentleness that cannot be called obstinate, and that outdoes obstinacy with those few words... Language, perpetuating itself, keeps still. (145/219)

Derrida (1990)

- In Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener,” the narrator, a lawyer, cites Job (“with kings and counselors”). [...] Here, instead of the test God makes Job submit to, one could think of that of Abraham. Just as Abraham doesn’t speak a human language, just as he speaks in tongues or in a language that is foreign to every other human language, and in order to do that responds without responding, speaks without saying anything either true or false, says nothing determinate that would be equivalent to a statement, a promise or a lie, in the same way Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” takes on the responsibility of a response without response. [...] The modality of this repeated utterance that says nothing, promises nothing, neither refuses or accepts anything, the tense of this singularly insignificant statement reminds one of a nonlanguage or a secret language. Is it not as if Bartleby were also speaking “in tongues”? But in saying nothing general or determinable, Bartleby doesn’t say absolutely nothing. [...] If Abraham has already consented to *make a gift of death*, and to give to God the death that he is going to put his son to, if he knows that he will do it unless God stops him, can we not say that his disposition is such that he would, precisely, *prefer not to*, without being able to say to the world what is involved? Because he loves his son, he would prefer that God hadn’t asked him anything. He would prefer that God didn’t let him do it, that he would hold back his hand, that he would provide a lamb for the holocaust, that the moment of this mad decision would lean on the side of nonsacrifice, once the sacrifice were to be accepted. He will not decide *not to*, he has decided *to*, but he would prefer not to. He can say nothing more and will do nothing more if God, if the Other, continues to lead him towards death, to the death that is offered as a gift. And Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” is also a sacrificial passion that will lead him to death, a death given by the law, by a society that doesn’t even know why it acts

the way it does. (GD74-75/DM106-107)

Deleuze, "Bartleby; or, The Formula" (1989)

- "Bartleby" is neither a metaphor for the writer nor the symbol of anything whatsoever. It is a violently comical text, and the comical is always literal. It is like the novellas of Kleist, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, or Beckett, with which it forms a subterranean and prestigious lineage. It means only what it says, literally. [...] But in what does the literality of the formula consist? (E68/C89)

- The effect of the formula-block is not only to impugn what Bartleby prefers not to do, but also to render what he was doing impossible, what he was supposed to prefer to continue doing. (70/92) [...] In short, the formula that successively refuses every other act has already engulfed the act of copying, which it no longer even needs to refuse. [...] 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. (71/92) [...] it hollows out a zone of indetermination that renders words indistinguishable, that creates a vacuum within language. But it also stymies the speech acts that a boss uses to command, that a kind friend uses to ask questions or a man of faith to make promises. (73/95) [...] it severs language from all reference, in accordance with Bartleby's vocation, to be *a man without references*, someone who appears suddenly and then disappears, without reference to himself or anything else. (74/95) [...] There is nothing particular or general about Bartleby: he is an Original. (83/106)

→ - America is the potential of the man without particularities, the Original Man. (85/109) [...] the new messianism, or the democratic contribution of American literature [...] According to Melville or Lawrence, brotherhood is a matter for original souls (87/112) [...] The great community of celibates (89/113) [...] Bartleby is not the patient, but the doctor of a sick America, the *Medicine-Man*, the new Christ or the brother to us all. (90/114)

Agamben, "Bartleby, or On Contingency" (1993)

- As a scrivener, Bartleby belongs to a literary constellation. [...Akaky Akakievich... Bouvard and Pécuchet... Prince Myshkin... Kafka's courtroom clerks...] But Bartleby also belongs to a philosophical constellation, and it may be that it alone contains the figure merely traced by the literary constellation to which Bartleby belongs [il se peut que celle-ci seulement contienne le chiffre de la figure que celle-là [la constellation littéraire] ne fait que tracer] (243) [...] This is the philosophical constellation to which Bartleby the scrivener belongs. As a scribe who has stopped writing, Bartleby is the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives, and at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of this Nothingness as pure, absolute potentiality. (253-254)

- The "potential not to" [impotenza] is the cardinal secret of the Aristotelian doctrine of potentiality, which transforms every potentiality in itself into an impotentiality. (245) [...] The scribe who does not write (of whom Bartleby is the last, exhausted figure) is perfect potentiality [...] (247)

- Bartleby's absolute potentiality ↔ Nietzsche's eternal return ("The infinite repetition of what was abandons all its potential not to be." (268))

- Critics have viewed Bartleby, like Joseph K., as a Christ figure (Deleuze calls him "a new Christ") who comes to abolish the old Law and to inaugurate a new mandate [...]. But if Bartleby is a new Messiah, he comes not, like Jesus, to redeem what was, but to save what was not. (270)

Rancière, « Deleuze, Bartleby, and the Literary Formula » (1998) (severe criticism of Deleuze)

Summary: The formula privileged by Deleuze shows the very notion of literary originality or its absoluteness, that is, “the literary autonomy and self-demonstration” (148/181), and is an extension of Flaubert’s principle that only the style is an absolute way of seeing things in literature, which itself is a “metaphysics of literature” (150/184-185). [This is the constant thesis of Rancière.]* This metaphysics of literature, trying to sever the literature purely from the circle of mimesis, reinsert it after all in the mimetic circle – Deleuze’s comments on Bartleby as well as his comments on Proust belong to this metaphysics. If “formulas” and “figures” of the “heroes” of stories are privileged in Deleuze’s comments on literature, it is because they “symbolize” the operation of the literature. Deleuze reads therefore in the end the literary works symbolically and allegorically, in spite of his emphasis on the “formula”, that is, the materiality or the literality of the literary work. And in that reading, the literary works become stories of fraternal community which fights against paternal representational model (Bartleby becomes heroic doctor of America or the new Christ). Here, we recognize “the aporia of the passage that Deleuze summoned literature” (162).

* “Flaubert’s text is taken here as an illustrated version exemplary of the metaphysics that literature requires to exist as a specific art, as a specific mode of the immanence of thought in matter. [...] What is opposed to *mimesis* is, in Dleuzian terms, becomings and haecceities. It is the emancipation of expressive details, the entrance into a zone of indeterminacy, the discovery of fraternity.” (F149-150/C184)

L’Effet Bartleby

I. On Blanchot

- Formulons l’hypothèse suivante : délaissant progressivement le mythe et la fascination qui s’y attache, Blanchot serait passé de *Moby Dick*, livre-monde dont il fournit une lecture encore marquée par Hegel, à *Bartleby*, fable de l’infinie patience de l’écriture lorsque celle-ci se fait réplique plutôt que répliqué. C’est ainsi que Bartleby, tantôt écrivain, tantôt scribe, voué à « l’interminable, l’incessant » qui caractérisent pour Blanchot l’acte même et la « folie d’écrire », traverse l’œuvre du critique à la façon d’un astre blême. (32)

- Bartleby, donc, comme figure du désastre, du neutre, de ce qui désactive l’instance dialectique. [...] en Bartleby, en cette figure désolée, mais qui est pour Blanchot d’une extrême douceur, vouée à l’infini de l’abandon et de la patience, se scelle un certain passage de la *littérature* à l’*écriture*. (40)

- Sortir de la dialectique par le neutre, cela implique que la négativité ne soit plus érigée en transcendantal, mais que quelque chose comme une différence indifférente, comme pré-originnaire, puisse être pensée laquelle désoriente la pensée. (45)

II. On Blanchot and Derrida

- Et c’est précisément autour de ce lien de Bartleby au sacrifice, lien tantôt explicite, tantôt inscrit comme en filigrane, que le propos de Blanchot et celui de Derrida entre en contact, sans véritablement *se toucher*. (55)

- C’est cette collusion, souterraine, malaisée, entre la figure de Bartleby et la pensée du judaïsme chez Blanchot qu’il nous faut à présent examiner [...] Singulièrement, Derrida, lui, fera de Bartleby, un... Abraham, qui préférera ne pas (sacrifier Isaac). (56)

- Soit deux versions de Bartleby : du passif, du patient de *L’Écriture du désastre* au singulier Abraham-Bartleby de

Donner la mort, celui qui préférerait ne pas (sacrifier Isaac) – deux interprétations qui prennent leur source dans la différence entre les deux penseurs. (65)

- Chez Blanchot, le sacrifice est conservé *et* suspendu à mesure même de ce que le judaïsme est érigé en puissance démythifiante ; chez Derrida, il faut que le récit biblique « ne soit pas une fable » pour que l'on puisse avérer l'indéconstructible du sacrifice d'Abraham, et de la littérature qui s'y fonde. (75)

III. On Deleuze

- La clinique deleuzienne commande bel et bien deux figures de la psychose, une figure littéraire, et une figure qui reste en deçà de la littérature, comme bloquée au stade clinique. Aussi nous faudra-t-il lire le Wolfson de Deleuze comme la contre-figure ou la contre-épreuve de son *Bartleby*. (92)

- L'opposition construite par Deleuze entre *Bartleby* et Wolfson est-elle si pertinente que cela ? (104)

IV. On Deleuze and Rancière

- À bien des égards, *Bartleby* relève de cette Image de la pensée qui s'élabore au XIXe siècle, et dont l'impersonnalité schizophrénique repérée par Rancière chez Flaubert n'est que l'une des composantes. (119)

V. On Agamben

- Le chiffre philosophique informerait la figure littéraire, ce qui est aussi soutenir l'irréductible hétéronomie de la littérature. Le dispositif de lecture, extrêmement habile, est proche parfois ici, dans la séduction qu'il exerce indubitablement, du tour de passe-passe conceptuel. (128)

- Lire Agamben lisant *Bartleby*, c'est alors mettre au jour une véritable syntaxe philosophique, laquelle vise à réengendrer le texte littéraire comme pur produit d'un chiffage. (129)

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