THE MEANING OF WORK AND ITS CONTEXT: A REINTERPRETATION OF “BARTLEBY, THE SCRIVENER” BY HERMAN MELVILLE

GIUSEPPE RUVolo

QUERY SHEET

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Q54. Au: Could you please provide Borges: editor(s) and chapter page numbers?
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Q58. Au: For the two Kaes et al. References: If 7 or less authors, list all names; if 8 or more, list the first 6 names, then … and then the final author’s name.
Q59. Au: Could you please provide the volume number and page range for Lo Mauro et al, 2012?
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Q61. Au: Could you please provide page numbers for Profita & Ruvolo 2009?
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Q63. Au: Could you please provide page numbers for Rossi Monti?
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"The meaning of work and its context: A reinterpretation of “bartleby, the scrivener” by herman melville"
Giuseppe Ruvolo
By means of a critical reinterpretation of the famous short story by Herman Melville titled “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” I propose a psycho-anthropological explanation of work behaviors, relationships in work environments, and their psychopathological repercussions. The article notably examines behaviors and work relationships connecting them as outcomes of single individuals’ efforts to mentalize ideological–cultural models determining them in a given historical moment. A reductively individualistic interpretation is criticized, which is typically present in clinical and work psychology and ascribes to the single person presumed psychical deficits and exclusively looks in his/her personal history for causes of disadaptive behaviors and antecedents of psychopathological formations.

**KEYWORDS:** Ideological–cultural models of work relationships, literary text psychology, work psychopathology

**INTRODUCTION**

In 1853, two years after his most important work, *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville published “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street.”

Set in a lawyer’s office located in Wall Street, New York, this story is mostly famous for the protagonist’s enigmatic behavior. He is the scrivener Bartleby. The author entitles the owner of this office with the narrating voice, whose detailed description of work relationships has initially aroused our interest as psychologists dealing with work and organizations.

The main connection I wish to explore in this article is the one relating the context of this small working-relational environment, on the background of the historical–cultural context of that time and place, or meta-context, with protagonist Bartleby’s “odd,” enigmatic vicissitudes, in relation with the other characters of the story, including the narrator.

The interpreting perspective I adopt is the one suggested by methodical hermeneutics in the study of texts (Gadamer, 1960), obviously with the look of psychological expertise: the story is a text, inserted in a context. I address with a...
question, to answer which I look for answers in the text itself. And my question is: what does Bartleby’s (enigmatic?) position tell us about the meaning of work and the consequences in life and personal relationships of work relationships in the incipient, but already well-defined capitalistic–financial system?

**THE STORY**

Bartleby (I will shorten with B.) shows up in the lawyer’s office, where they need a new scrivener, and he immediately starts working in a space created for him among three other collaborators. In the beginning he appears particularly solicitous and almost obsessively hard-working in tirelessly producing copies of deeds and documents, but, unexpectedly, when he is asked for the first time to “collate,” that is to revise copies produced in order to assess their conformity with the original, he definitely refuses, with no aggressive or polemic aim, but simply saying: “I would prefer not to.” This expression will be repeated every time B. is called to collate, and, later on, for other tasks concerning office service activities. Both the owner and the other employees show their astonishment, especially because B. does not explain, justify, or reason his denial, and simply repeats the same sentence “I would prefer not to.” The narrator-owner tries to be tolerant and understand B.’s behavior, making up with his fantasy for the lack of explanations and sense left by the collaborator, even when he is extremely embittered. In the meantime, B. stops doing all kinds of activities as a scrivener and only remains immersed in the silence of his impenetrable, mysterious thoughts, with his look pointed toward the wall (which also recalls the name of the street) in front of the window. When the lawyer/narrator’s powerless tolerance cannot be further endured it pushes him to find a “soft” solution, the least painful, which is removing the scrivener: since he refuses to leave the office where he also sleeps at night saying the same old sentence, the narrator is forced to move his office in another building, not too far from there. The constant and silent attitude of passively refusing to act finally leads B. to be arrested and imprisoned (in the so-called New York’s Tombs), where he will let himself die, even refusing to eat.

Perhaps the main cause of the curious fame and success of this story lies in the enigma holding the reasons of scrivener Bartleby’s somewhat unprecedented and fatal behavior; a behavior, or condition, which is described in a rich literature of more or less creative and refined interpretations (for a critical review cf. Bacigalupi’s Introduction and Bibliographical note, 1992) of psychopathological diagnoses (Ballerini, 2002; Gozzetti, 1996; Rossi Monti, 2002), anthropo-philosophical elaborations (Agamben, 2001; Deleuze & Agamben, 1993), nourished by the clear absence in the text of any reference to the protagonist’s previous history, family, origins, recent past, the people he met. All these legitimate and stimulating interpretations leave however a certain dissatisfaction and sense of incompleteness. An effect the author wished to convey, obtained not giving biographical references and clues about the scrivener’s personal history? A narrative stratagem to arouse curiosity, for tickled sadism, in order to provoke/stimulate the reader’s imagination and interest?
In the bibliographic note preceding an Italian edition of Melville’s stories, Bacigalupo reports Bergmann’s influential comment, who “[…] politely argues with the critical line which tends to see in H. Melville’s stories some hidden meanings the author willingly (my bold) conceals to Harper’s and Putnam’s conformist readers” (Bacigalupo, 1992, p. LIV) and concludes with this quote: “We need to focus more on the reasons for which the symbolic world of these stories causes many apparently divergent interpretations; if suitably carried out, this kind of analysis, would also reveal us a lot about the stories themselves” (Bergmann, 1986, in Bacigalupo, 1992, p. LV).

Perhaps we do not really care about investigating like detectives on the author’s “real and hidden” intentions, but assuming that a work of art can be considered as such if one of the author’s mere rational or instrumental plans passes through it, and if, by means of it, something shows up to a certain extent beyond the author’s intentions that still and constantly needs to be recognized and pondered; something that necessarily and undoubtedly belongs to questions and meanings put on the way in which at a given time, in a more or less extended place, human beings live and give intentions to the world.

The hypothesis I am following is that an enigma remains, and keeps on feeding the productions of thoughts and meaning, because something is left that has not been analyzed and completely illuminated, even though 160 years have passed.

The analysis of Bartleby’s case from the viewpoint of work psychology is made particularly interesting and fruitful just for the fact that the text does not say anything about the protagonist’s family, childhood, or education, thus obliging us to study the subject simply considering his present experiences and reference context (1850, New York), which is in particular a work relationship micro-context. If on one hand the lack of data on his personal history deprives us of the chance to refer to the most qualified and up-to-date interpretation models of clinical and developmental psychology that allow understanding the individual’s personal-subjective world, on the other it makes us focus on the opportunities to understand the subject-at-work, regardless of his individual characteristic qualities (his “personalities”), as quintessential subject, impersonal witness, and representative of an event that probably involves each and every human being, no matter what their special subjectivity is. This limitation of the data source is, thus, precious to point out the role of a work relationship system on single individuals’ personal and relational life, or, better, the destiny of human life events as consequence of a certain cultural–historical system. In order to let the text speak, independently from the author’s (more or less aware) intentions, let us try to focus our attention on the facts, characters, and clues it offers, examining them as they are reported to us and letting our immediate perception color them of sensations and associations, with no special expectations, postponing to a later moment the effort of putting them together in a possible coherent picture that may let us obtain answers to my question.

From this moment on I will use the first person when my perceptions and reactions to the text representing the starting point my questions originate from and leading me in the search for sense and connections will be at stake, so
as the hermeneutic procedure requires in the dialogue with the text, where this latter stimulates the reactions of the reader/interpreter, who uses them as sparks for questions, to get back to the text itself and look for further answers, clues, and checks, capable to match in a coherent and always more data inclusive sense (cf. the *hermeneutic circle*, Gadamer, 1960).

TRUE TO THEIR NICKNAMES

The first theme that led me to reflect on this story is the use of the names. Unlike the other employees of the legal office who are never called with their real names, Bartleby is the only one among the protagonists of the office who has got a real name. Even the lawyer-narrator, in the story, has no name!5

The lawyer, owner of the office, employer, and narrating subject, only deals with financial issues, and not civil or penal lawsuits, justice, or courtrooms.6 His story shows him as careful observer of his employees, their work skills and faults, careful to use the first at their best and manage the second with tolerant rationality. When B. is hired, there are already three other employees, each of whom, after quite a long working life in common, has given the other a nickname, for their appearance or some habits or personal characteristics they have: Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut. These are the nicknames the narrator also uses in the story to call and refer to them in the dialogue he renders word by word, in such a natural and accepted manner, that the reader even forgets their real names or doubts if they really have been mentioned at the beginning of the story itself, when the three men are shortly but precisely described: checking the first part of the text we find out that this is not the case. At the beginning I felt slightly disappointed, as I focused my attention on these nicknames, but later on my annoyance got bigger: in the story you can really feel the atmosphere of civil and formal impersonality of relationships and communications between the employer and his collaborators, so much so that you think more about an English relational style than a more direct and pragmatic American one (the story is set in an office located in *Wall Street*, New York, but for a certain amount of time I kept on considering it set in London City), an atmosphere that seems to clash even more with the use of nicknames (today we would certainly define it as disrespectful, but what about then?) to describe people. Every time an employee talks to his employer, he starts by saying some respectful sentences such as: “without prejudice to your person ...,” a phrase that is not reciprocal, since the lawyer directly calls “his” employees by their nickname. Perhaps at that time was the use of nicknames in a work environment not considered disrespectful? A likely hypothesis; however, not plausible enough to prevent me from recording this information as noteworthy. Just imagine if an employer started calling his collaborators with a nickname. Are we today too emotional or irritable? While I was progressively thinking about it, my initial slight disappointment grew until it became a real indignation, which sent me back to that special classification of human figures (masks or *moppets*, to quote Pirandello) mentioned in a dialogue of Leonardo Sciascia’s *Il giorno della civetta [The day of the owl]*, representing the cultural anthropology of a certain kind of popular environment (directly conjugated with Mafia “subculture”),
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consisting of the following hierarchical–ordinal categories: uomini, mezzi uomini, ominicchi, pigliainculo, and quaquaraquà. Only the first defines a respectable person: in the anthropology language of the environment described by Sciascia they are uomini d’onore e di diritto [men of honor and right], while those included in the other categories could be considered omignoli [creeps], a sort of subhuman species, even if at various levels, as we could say of a classification of primates that are placed more or less close to men. I thought that in such an anthropological view, only real men would deserve to receive and be called with a real name, while omignoli [creeps] (masks, moppets), on the other hand, would only be worth a nickname. A name is to a man what a nickname is to a creep.

Since the setting, or better, the theater, where the story takes place, is that of a small work organization, it is not arbitrary to think that accepting and sharing the use of these sobriquets (only concerning employees) refers more to work relationships among involved subjects, who establish a role or command hierarchy that gives a value to their relationship with their job, tasks, goals, and reasons inscribed in the meaning assumed by work for each of them, rather than to social and cultural class disparities. We could tentatively synthesize that the place (in an anthropological, sociological, and psychological–relational sense) given to each of them starting from what they do (role, duties, results), configures their identity (what they are) and consequent recognitions (and downplaying) their nicknames seem to be an expression of. The employees of the story, thus, deserve a nickname, since they would be creeps.

SUBJECTIVITY, NARRATION, THOUGHT

As first person narrator, the lawyer is not only formally the owner and the boss of the organization, he is endowed with the status of subject, with interpretive powers/skills, author himself (even though through Melville’s narrative function) of a plot having meanings and connections that give a sense to events and subjective lived experiences. This is made more true by the fact that for the narrator the meaning of B.’s behavior remains enigmatic. He, the lawyer, is also the protagonist in the sense that around his work project, competence, motivations, goals, his collaborators’ roles are established and acquire sense. The other workers actually seem to depend on the boss-narrator as their employer, that is from a hierarchical, juridical, and organizational viewpoint, but also (for what the story shows us) in the sense that their point of view or representation is apparently quite similar to their boss’s, whose project legitimacy and work interests they take on as if they were theirs, especially when they have to interpret B.’s strange behaviors. None of them wants to wear B.’s shoes, even for just one moment; on the contrary, in some passages they show toward him a more disapproving and intolerant behavior than their boss, who at least attempts until the end to understand B., trying to imagine and investigate his reasons. The other employees strongly condemn him and show hurt by his behavior, both because it forces them to do what B. refuses to do, but also because they seem totally identified with their hierarchical–social order, and their employer’s purposes and interests. We could say that their narration would
be identical, or, anyhow, consistent with the lawyer’s. We could also say that the implicit narration in B.’s behavior is not that way, and his conduct appears as enigmatic just for this reason.

What is more, B. does not become author; his (potential or implicit) narration is never fulfilled, but his opposition, his “no,” is! This lack or omission of a self-narration (explanations, reasons, arguments, etc.), a personal viewpoint and a representation appears on one side as a pretense not to be obliged to justify one’s own reasons, but on the other it could testify a powerlessness to access a symbolic space where subjectification can be narrated, where one can become author.

The essential check of Bartleby’s failure and will to let himself die seems to lie in this pretense or powerlessness (and, to a certain extent, both of them). This check acquires a sense starting from B.’s refusal to do/work as a scrivener, that is to copy, reproduce a text (which is written by another person who is the only one we can call author) and, what is more, to control (collate, the first occasion where he pronounces his denial sentence) that what he has written is perfectly compliant with the reproduced text: collating actually consists of assuming that any divergence is forbidden, any concession to a more or less intentional production of the least autonomous variation to the text, would only be a mistake. Moreover, the text B. must reproduce has no sense for him; he himself does not have to deal with its content, meaning, or interpretation; for him the only important thing is the amount of transcribed pages (corresponding to the calculation of his payment); it has no other value in itself, its contents and purposes for which it has been created or is reproduced.

The narrator clearly shows us this alienated and misleading meaning of the scrivener’s work, highlighting it with the reference to the immeasurable difference between working as a scrivener or as a poet. In special reference to the unrewarding task of collating, which B. refuses, he admits: “It’s an extremely boring, tiring, lethargic matter. I can very well imagine that, for some hot-blooded tempers it would be totally unacceptable. … I doubt that passionate poet Byron would be happy to sit with Bartleby and examine a legal document, let’s say five hundred pages, densely written in tiny little handwriting” (my bold) (p. 14).

The lack of B.’s narration, the fact that he does not wish to be author of a text or a work, thus rejecting the chance to see his potential reasons recognized through his narration, therefore to show as subject, could represent the result of the lack of thought, with the aggravating circumstance (or the consequence) of losing one’s own identity markers (lack of memory, history, relationships, connections, places we can call our own): ultimately, the impossibility to exist, to be there.

WORK, FRUSTRATION AND NOT ASSIMILIATED AGGRESSIVENESS

As to the other three employees, two are scriveners, and the third, a 12-year-old kid, is a delivery boy for auxiliary tasks. The first two are not exactly described as model employees; their profiles are a small masterpiece of tragic comedy: Turkey appears diligent only from the morning until noon, and then he becomes so hyperactively dull and clumsy, smearing and staining documents and, at the same
time, showing indifference to his employer’s critical remarks; Nippers instead is efficient during the afternoon, but unreliable in the morning. He is described as “…victim at the same time of two evil forces: ambition and indigestion,” the combined effect of which shows in evident intolerance behaviors, “…a certain impatience for a mere copyist’s duties”, undisguised anger and aggressiveness mainly addressed to his working table.

Together with these descriptions of the two scriveners, we cannot forget to recall the classic scene of awkward and tragic comedy starring Chaplin at the assembly line in the movie titled Modern Times. With the due differences, scriveners Turkey and Nippers, too, just like Charlot, try to do their best, applying their zeal to their job, but they really cannot: while factory worker Charlot cannot because the pressing rhythm of the assembly line overcomes his physical skills, both scriveners seem not to be able to because in them there are opposing forces that rebel from within to the fulfillment of duties they would like, strive and fail to carry out, just like Chaplin’s factory worker. It does not seem rash to interpret Turkey’s afternoon behavior as a form of apparently involuntary (passive?) aggressiveness toward his job—he spoils it after he has duly carried it out— and indirectly toward his employer. On the other hand, Nippers’s behavior much more evidently and actively expresses his strong discomfort for (against) his work as a scrivener, represented by the object-desk. In both cases the discomfort does not lead to a real form of protest: even if both employees suffer, they barely question their role, tasks, the hierarchical order assigning them that place: they rather voluntarily share their employer’s viewpoint and interests, just like good employees. Their behaviors are classified as acceptable and negligible anomalies of their character or their unsuitable digestive system. This is especially clear when they are called to express their opinion on B.’s behavior. They do not admit in any way that B.’s reasons could have something in common with their ill-concealed discomfort; on the contrary, they are much more hot-blooded than the lawyer and, moreover, mad at B. because his refusal to collaborate consequently increases their duties.

Only Ginger does not seem to suffer from any kind of discomfort from carrying out his duties, but he does not work as a scrivener, or reproduce documents that have no sense. In his job as a delivery boy he can autonomously organize his times and movements, make something that seems to have a sense of fulfillment in itself, for which he seems to have some certain discreional autonomy and freedom, even though in the short term and within limited boundaries for limited goals, so his work makes him active and actually looks more like a real service work. What is more, his father’s social progress ambitions are projected on him, and this puts Ginger in a project, an evolutionary work and life perspective, a hope for his own future. For the moment, he certainly also works for the lawyer’s project, as a tool, and is also part of the work relationships aiming at the owner’s profit; however, he can subjectively project himself in a future identification with him and kid himself that this is good and enticing: this seems to differentiate Ginger’s clearly and consistently collaborative attitude with both scriveners’ troubled and ambivalent one.
A NOT RECIPROCATED GENEROUS GIFT, BEYOND INGRATITUDE, ANGER

In a passage, the narrator refers about the “unpleasant” experience connected to having given Turkey one of his jackets he did not use any more but which had a certain value. He would have expected gratitude, translated into a greater haste in his work or a more respectful attitude toward him. On the contrary, he notices opposite reactions almost similar to prank or ill-concealed anger. In the text he prefers to get rid of this weirdness saying to himself that the employer would have reacted as a “beast that has been given a larger portion of fodder than usual, and the consequent feeling of satisfaction has made it shier than its master and, in any case, ungrateful of its benefactor […]”

How rich in meanings and paraferents this metaphor is. The first, the juxtaposition with the beast: Turkey’s unthankful conduct seems to authorize the narrator to it, it being an inhuman or not human behavior, a lack of respect toward him, a generous man. Turkey would be a beast for this reason … but his nickname already seemed to foretell it.

The second, the subservience relationship: a beast being full has neither reasons to be/feel dependent (slave?) on its master, nor obligations to recognize his presumed generosity: it is its need for food and survival that makes it the slave of a master. The connection between these two beings is that of a dependence-domination based on the need of one who waits for the presumed generosity of the other for the fulfillment of his needs: when this state of need is lacking, the dependence would not exist. Of course, a beast cannot think that if it is left free, not subjected to a master’s possession and supremacy, it could provide for its own needs. This thought does not seem to be present in the lawyer and his employees’ mind: in this may they be more similar to beasts? Since they cannot see, imagine, prefigure, think about alternatives?

In the end, the narrator seems once again not to be able to conceive the delicate complexity, in a certain sense the implicit violence, too, which can be subjectively experienced by those who, like the three scriveners, live an unhappy condition, which is not tolerated and ill-concealed, and, moreover, he realizes he has become the object of pitiful generosity that would expect thankfulness. The supplementary fodder can be in a certain sense compared to the incentivization systems even in the most evolved work organizations, when they systematically fail in their purpose to increase their employees’ performance motivation: first of all because its meaning is ambiguous: is it a reward or a misleading tactic? More broadly speaking, because, if the structure of work relationships is perceived as unfair, then all possible generosity acts take the mocking taste of a manipulation, expression of a supremacy logic where the strongest can take the liberty to be pitiful generous, after he has created the uncomfortable condition of the weakest, neediest, most suffering or greatest loser.

Aggressiveness in the office is already present before B. arrives: it is structurally inserted in the charter of interests it is based on: if the commonly shared ideal is individual financial profit, scriveners obtain a really poor result, faced with an irrepressible frustration deriving from their boring and repetitive tasks.
Deleuze (1989, 1993) thinks that B.’s linguistic formula “[…] Despite its normal construction, sounds like an anomaly, an aberration,” “[…] he does not say no, but just declines a not-preferred […]. However he does not even accept […]. The formula is devastating because it mercilessly eliminates both what can be preferred and any not-preferred” (Deleuze, 1993, pp. 12–15). He matches it to the psychotic language that uses the same words of common language, and yet they do not refer to a familiar sense, but something incomprehensible, which cannot semantically be decided. Of course in that “formula” something is asserted and something else denied, so, if we really wish to understand it, we need to find out referents, both of the statement and the denial it expresses. And, even more importantly, differentiate them, if we do not wish to find ourselves powerless and confused in front of a formula which at the same time states and denies itself such as “I’m lying,” a formula that cannot be actually decided since the subject states something that refers to himself and reveals its falseness. But this does not seem B.’s case: if we divide his expression into two parts, we can detect in the dry verbal part (I would prefer) a statement, even though in the conditional form, which declares a subject’s stance (I exist!) and expresses his/her will, a choice (I would prefer, that is I wish … I consider, think, choose …); in the second part, on the contrary, the object is mentioned, that is not-this. The fact that the object of desire is not mentioned/identified, unless in a a-negative form, cannot confute the first verbal part, does not confute that B. wishes, although he presumptively says that he does not know or cannot indicate his preference in a way being other than the negative form, as an inversion in the opposite of what he cannot immediately, and perhaps permanently, indicate, since he cannot positively imagine, think, identify it. This impossibility, however, does not prevent B. from clearly, courageously, and decisively expressing his being a subject, his right to exist even while refusing, while saying “no”! And this seems to have a greater assertive value, considering that he has neither any reason for this denial nor alternatives to it.

We could compare B.’s position to that of some child’s evolutionary phases: one is exactly that of saying his NO! which seems to be generated by the pleasure to identify himself in the opposition, be pleased and reiterate the discovery of his own power/right as a subject; the other, even more primitive, where the newborn becomes aware of his needs as he feels a growing discomfort, a (self-) perception of his own state, but he neither understands the object corresponding to his needs yet, nor certainly the reasons for which he feels so bad, he cannot represent, think about, verbalize it.

B. as desiring subject opposes himself to reality; he would prefer … something else, not what he is requested to do: he does not properly refuse because he does not want to obey, but because he would like not this. What is more, B. cannot and does not want to change reality, therefore his assertive/desiring movement stops powerless to pure denial, it does not become premise of a proposal or quest for an alternative object that corresponds to his wish. B. knows very well, and is resigned about it, that he cannot change the world and his place in it. He therefore can only let himself die as the only act of volition he is able to carry out, together with that
of denying: in this way he becomes a nonpassive actor/author and represents his evidence of denial against that world he cannot live in and share, and does it with his behavior-evidence, he being unable to do it with narration, so he does it with his life. He wishes he is not lacking volition and determination or choice, he has simply not adjusted himself to wish what he is asked to do, and, at the same time, he does not intend to fight, or show hostile. This is B.’s weirdness, he asserts himself and his right to exist, ending up with saying no even to life itself not to give up with a wounded dignity when he realizes he is a non-author, a non-thinking person, a non-man. Rather than the humiliation of his colleagues’ unhappy deference, which makes them suffer every day, he prefers dying, as Baldini (1952) has well synthesized in his previously mentioned comment: “[…] aware of the human dignity of thought, he refuses to vegetate when this fails” (p. 142). It is a suicide.

THE WALL–LEVIATHAN

B.’s tragic stance shows human powerless and unhappy awareness that prevents men from living in the world they are immersed in as it is, transcending it, but, most of all, which makes them think they cannot change it (at least not alone), thus finding themselves in front of an impenetrable and insurmountable wall. This is the wall B. constantly stares at from his window, which in his polysemous essence metonymically represents the whole society based on that Wall Street capitalistic–financial social system being the origin of work relationships, the meaning of work and, inevitably, identities and recognitions. That wall refers to the White Whale Melville actually calls “the wall” for the vastness of its size and the sense of bewildered powerlessness it causes. Not negligible in this sense is the assonance between whale and wall, based on their common root. In the introductory chapter of Moby Dick, Melville himself (Etimologia ed estratti [Etymology and Extracts], cf. Adelphi 1998, p. 21 and following of the Italian version), points out these linguistic–symbolic connections, referring to the origin of the word whale as defined by the dictionaries Webster and Richardson of the time: from the Swedish hval, the Danish hvalt, the Dutch wal, and the Anglo-Saxon verb wallen.

Even more direct and significant is the matching with Moby Dick, when—much more frequently and with special emphasis—the whale is called Leviathan. Always as far as Moby Dick in Etymology and Extracts is concerned, besides a long series of old and recent sources, Melville quotes as “HOBBES’s Leviathan initial sentence” the following definition: “This great Leviathan is created ad hoc, and called Republic or State (Civitas in Latin) which is only an artificial man” (Melville, 1998, p. 25).

In Hobbes, The Leviathan is exactly the representation of the social system: an enormous superpersonal-artificial-monster-man built by the totality of individuals and their social relationships; against it even Moby Dick’s hero, Captain Ahab, knows from the beginning of his fight he is doomed to die.

I have initially asked a question about the meaning of work expressed by the story, referring to the need to glean the data of the text, which shows an organizational micro-context, the legal office, placed in a cultural–historical macro-context.
All clues indicate what this macro-context is: we are on Wall Street, the heart and symbol of the Western financial system; the lawyer-narrator deals with economic–financial gains. His business, profile, work project, ideals are undoubtedly those of a society founded on the centrality of profit, clearly announced and theorized by Adam Smith, which in the mid-19th century already appears perfectly recognizable in its features and consequences for personal relationships.

This is the world B. cannot live in and change, which, however, he seems to have incomplete awareness of. Perhaps B.’s impenetrable thoughts when he is completely rapt and estranged to stare at the wall are built by the difficult and for him useless cognitive process aimed at thinking, understanding the reasons of his condition, the context producing it. In a society founded on profit and the ideal of a financial individualism based on appropriation, men end up becoming instrumental figures/masks and work in voluntary, more or less unaware, slavery to this impersonal apparatus.

UNHAPPY (UN-)AWARENESS AND MENTALIZATION DEADLOCK

B. answers to the lawyer’s request of letting him know the reason of his behavior only once: “You know,” he answers. When the narrator hears these words, he immediately gives them the meaning, in that moment for him undoubted, that B. cannot keep on working because he has become blind or his sight has been strongly reduced due to the effort required. This certainty, however, will later prove for the lawyer, too, as totally unfounded.

I think we can say that in this expression B. gives his employer his same uncertain, even if unexpressed, awareness: that his behavior is understandable and coherent in the light of his condition, and this is clear, or even obvious and taken for granted. In his narration, as we have seen, the lawyer shows as authentically involved and longing to understand B.’s viewpoint. In many passages he appears as sympathetic, more tolerant than his same employees, and accommodating, as if he was aware, or at least doubtful, that he was partly responsible; B. himself seems to behave as if his employer could understand him. After all, if B.’s condition is created by the system of social and work relationships, his employer’s is its integrated and commonly shared part, even though in an apparently more advantageous, privileged role: however, he has also been sharing the meaning (or the lack of meaning) men are immersed in. Just like B., he should know it, too!

The condition of unhappy awareness starts showing up perhaps since the beginning of the 19th century, mostly among the so called middle class (Fusaro, 2012) of the employees, which, unlike the working one, can hardly recognize its condition of subordination and seems to identify itself and collude with the ruling class, like the two scriveners of the story. In the story, even though the employer seems enlivened by the best intentions to understand what happens to his employees, he also seems he cannot understand how the same structure of work relationships and everyone’s relation with his or her own job defines and determines each person’s identitarian and subjective statute (omignoli [creeps]), including his own. When B. says he should know it, the narrator tries to find a decontextualized and
desubjectivized explanation: B. has only a sight problem! This rationalizing drift has the advantage to adjust our conscience; it is paradigmatic of all discomfort justifications, the defensive and reassuring blindness that does not question the status quo and crooked interests of those who think they can profit from it. According to this logic, the desubjectivized and decontextualized causes of discomfort lie in the body, in a physiological dysfunction of some organs; anyhow, explanations must be searched and found inside the individual, even when not exactly in the body. They lie either in his character, his personality (two rather questionable concepts from an epistemological viewpoint), therefore in a, this time, psychic dysfunction, or in a person’s education and development. But not in ongoing relationships, their structure, in the organization and hierarchy of roles within a context placed, in turn symbolically overlapped in the context of social–historical relationships (cultural devices, as Michel Foucault would define them) (Redaelli, 2011).

What is more, we also need to point out how, for its clear connection with B.’s denial, in the mid-19th century there was a relevant social phenomenon (which was also replicated in some literary trends) of middle-class refusal of work and apology of idleness. Sergio Perosa (2013) refers to this movement in relation to our story in the introduction to a recent Italian version: “[B.’s behavior] has got unusual similarities with what happens at his times. Avoiding activities, the old-fashioned absent-minded taste (or perhaps the assertion) of doing nothing, loitering away, idleness and inertia, has an upsurge and manifests itself just in the mid-19th century when Melville’s story is published […] clearly in relation with the protestant and capitalistic ethics of work and the impact of industrial revolution, which imposes oppressive and alienating work forms [such as B.’s one, more repetitive than anything else]” (Perosa, 2013, p. VIII).

For the people who insist in understanding B. with the categories of individual psychology, he ends up becoming an alien, with no story and biography. As I have already said, this omission of the story is not only not casual, but also meaningful: Melville does not show us a special subject’s personal history; there is no way, no sign sending us back to the possibility to interpret B.’s destiny as a matter of individual psychology of “personality” or “character.” We are led by the writer to look for the reasons in the characteristics of work relationship context, and find out new meaning referents in the cultural–historical meta-context being its framework. For us, as for the lawyer-narrator, B. himself and the other employees, the epistemological obstacle to understand is actually this: we do not consider immediate the fact of being obliged to connect B.’s condition and position with the cultural–historical framework that gives it a meaning, perhaps because we give for granted that the world (e.g., personal and work relationships) must only be as it is: this is reality! Therefore, we all have to sort it out and individually manage our quota of discomfort! Considering that many people adapt to it, why is B. not able to, even though putting up with his considerable amount of frustration?

In the story, B.’s denial astonishes us as readers as well as the other characters, whose reactions he stimulates, but does not lead them to discuss the social and symbolic order that organizes people’s relational life in the legal office and the larger context it is settled in. None of them thinks to get the sense of what determines them from this larger social–historical context producing everyone’s social
and working roles, their relevant subjective lives experiences (their “stances” and statuses of well- and ill-being), and relevant self-hetero-acknowledgment.

The story clearly speaks not only about B.’s discomfort, but also Turkey’s and Nippers’s more disguised embarrassment, as well as, why not, the lawyer’s awkwardness when to a certain extent he empathizes with B.

The irreducible difference between B. and all the others lies in his “I’d rather not,” while the others seem to prefer the opposite! That is, even if they feel some discomfort, they are not led to fight against a common logic we could define as similar to Voltaire’s Candide: ours is the best of possible worlds. They cannot even realize/imagine that there can be others. In this way the cultural/historical world is naturalized, justified, and absolutized. Therefore they do not hesitate to share it, endorse it, and ... stop thinking about it! This endorsing the world they live in implies, in one process, that they cannot even think they are justifying and actively creating it. B.’s unhappy stance—I cannot say if it’s a cause or consequence of his denial—clearly consists of a swerve with respect to this obvious “common sense” that justifies, naturalizes, and does not allow thinking critically, in order to understand and transcend the perspective of the context we live in. His opposing stance does not seem to offer him any advantage, but makes him a powerless victim. He remains blocked at a threshold, a limit: a limited, perhaps confused, awareness, where there is perception and acceptance of one’s own tragic condition, but no sign that B. can articulate a thought on the connections between his condition and the cultural–historical device producing it.19 In the swerve of his denial, B. does/cannot discuss the establishment as well: unlike the others, he observes it, painfully feels it, and finds it again in the wall: a wall against his critical-reflexive-creative-imaginative thinking, a wall of powerlessness and lack of hope to change his condition, a wall that suffocates any vital impulse. And with his head resting against the wall of the prison (Tombs), that, as a sign of final abandonment to his destiny, B. lets himself die. The wall is the limit that does not give B. any vital chance: if only he could have given his sense, different from the “obvious” one accepted by the others, if only he could have imagined and formulated it in a narration, becoming author, if not of an accomplished work, at least of a thought living name, dignity and recognition to his own unhappiness and powerlessness, he would very probably not be resigned to death.

Here B.’s defeat is our incapability to understand, mentalize, and transcend cultural devices (or meta-contexts) within the coordinates by means of which we give meanings, inhabit the world, and think.

Mentalization (thinking, mentally processing the meaning) cannot forget the frameworks of the context, the meanings and roles implied by working relation systems. In a precise, perhaps restricted, but not generic and ambiguous acception, here with the term mentalization I do not mean a simple attribution of meaning to something (object) a subject may experience: cultural codes and ideologies provide for an already given meaning to all subjects sharing them; it implies no struggle or creativity to associate the “thing” to its commonly shared social/cultural representation. For this reason we talk about “common sense,” within which meanings appear obvious: there is no need to think, process them once again, assume they are not “true”; no need to closely examine them or to
make us suspect they can hide (self-) deceits that may put us in a disadvantagedcondition and, in the final analysis, the impossibility to look for or imagine alternativeness of meanings (and organizational, relational, social systems). Without suspending the various types of truth our conscience may have to deal with, we can start no mentalization process in the real sense of the word.

After all, the awareness of values, ideals, and obligations established by a certain cultural–historical model (or device) within which human beings move, is never either immediate or easily recognizable, because that model/device is the final word of minds themselves, that is enlivens motivations and choices human beings carry out, the way they interpret and inhabit the world in their time. Anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and economy point out, each one according to its perspective, this fundamental dynamic of partial superimposition among cultural models (narrations, identities, mentalities, instructions, etc.) and single individuals’ conducts20: what we wish (not only as object, but also what we wish to be/become), think, choose, is made desirable, thinkable, and preferable within a pervasive logic each subject has learned from the cultural universe that has educated him.21 Therefore, the awareness of what thinks about us, quoting one of Kaes’s expressions (1991), can only be a difficult, sometimes even painful, result of a critical reflection process that does not certainly occur in a natural or automatic way and requires transcending skills to be able to detach from “common sense.”

B. represents the scandal of the disconfirmation of good common sense: how can he not think that his refusal to work will give him no advantage, how can he not look for adaptation, how can he live with no place? He is out of common sense, alone and estranged, but also upsetting for all those who get in touch with him, do not understand, and, inevitably, help marginalize, remove, and isolate him, eventually, in prison (Garritano, 1999). There is thus a lack of sense, a failure of the intelligibility process—which belongs to B. as to the lawyer and the other employees—which could be reactivated only if—meta-contextual—sense referents of Bartleby’s condition/stance are tracked down. If they are not tracked down (but assumed as essential, obvious, natural, and therefore out of the reflexive conscience), no mentalization, no chance to transcend one’s own condition/stance in the world is possible.

In order for this to take place, neither the awareness of discomfort, nor a dumb opposition are enough: to be able to express itself, the thought cannot do without cultural, value-based, ideal sense horizons, and when ideals and values orientating us show as inadequate, it is necessary to be able to formulate and re-define new ones, in order for our thought (and, consequently, choices and action) to be able to move to new, alternative horizons, allowing us to distance from a cognitive and reflexive viewpoint (a transcending skill) on the world we live in.

**DEAD/LOST LETTERS AND HOPE-BEARING LETTERS**

At the end of the story, after B.’s death, the narrator almost reluctantly, as a tribute to the reader’s curiosity, says he has heard a “tiny piece of information” on the scrivener’s personal history: he had been hired as an employee in an office of
“correspondence which has never arrived to its destination, that is dead letters, and had been fired due to political reshuffling. … Dead letters! It almost seems like speaking of dead men. … Life messengers, these letters run to their death. Ah Bartleby! Ah, humanity” (p. 47).

According to Deleuze (1993) and Agamben (2001), B.’s action in reality is a “de-creation,” a gesture that in its essentiality puts in crisis the commonly shared symbolic and imaginary order, flooring co-protagonists and readers. Agamben finds in B.’s behavior a more powerful act than simply doing-writing, “[…] a scrivener who does not simply stop writing, but <would rather not to>, […] just writes his power not to write” (Agamben, 2001, 1993, p. 35), thus stating his power of not doing and not being. “B. takes his chance in an experiment de contingencia absoluta … the contingency, which can or cannot be, and, in his opposition to the necessary, coincides with the space of human freedom” (Agamben, 2001, 1993, pp. 74–75). According to Agamben, lost letters are dead because they have realized the power of being—in our case the worst one, B.’s death—but would carry the message of what has never taken place.

For Deleuze and Agamben, psychology is useless to understand B., because it only offers rationalizing explanations, “which presume themselves,” like preexisting pathological dispositions.

They agree on the interpretation that B. is a “no reference” man, or “the man with no peculiarity,” “the formula … excises all kinds of reference from the language, according to B.’s vocation, being a man with no reference.” Deleuze (1993), however, ends his essay with this comment: “B. is not the patient, but the doctor of a sick America, the Medicine-Man, the new Christ: or the broche of us all” (p. 44).

These philosophers’ reflexions undoubtedly appear licit and interesting, as well as the metaphorical matching between lost letters (writing) bearing life and potentialities of an alternative world that has not become true (and cannot be imagined), rich in references to human creativity/power and, obviously, his opposite, ongoing powerlessness, sufferance, and death. What is more, we have to agree with the judgment on that psychological epistemology, which—mocking nosographic psychiatry and a blindly individualistic–intrapsychic perspective—takes on a person’s behavior as direct evidence of the individual’s supposedly patho-morphic functioning, concluded in itself and perfectly explained. We must, however, point out that they seem to systematically give up with looking for a coherent interpretation of B.’s behavior, remaining on the level of context and dynamics of work relationships even if clearly described by the text—as I try to show in this interpretation—orientating, instead, their reflections on a de-contextualized analytical–existential field, where B. becomes the man’s universal symbol in relation to his creative-generative expression, thus excluding any set reference to B.’s tragedy, leaving aside the connection between subjective-individual vicissitudes and their social–historical determinants. We think this is the reason for which AAs lead B. back to the category of a man with no references, qualities, or determinations. If, as Deleuze concludes, B. is a Medicine-man of a sick America and, more broadly, of a world organized around a cultural/historical device, this is made possible by the fact that he bears the signs of such a world, not lacking determinations, but we risk
not to see them: he is not anyone (if at all, his co-protagonists are), not the adapted mass-man, even if suffering, but represents everyone, just our brother.

If we give up looking for the meaning of these connections between context and subject, then we only have to universalize human beings’ tragedy and destiny as an—almost natural—condition of need, independent from the choices of how we build and inhabit the world, with the consequence to think that human beings of a certain era are not responsible for the world they live in. Rather, my perspective identifies in social/historical devices, in meaning horizons of ideals and values work organizations, the meaning of work, reasons for the tragedy of creativity and the suffering in work relationships are found upon. The impossibility to re-connect work with its primary purpose (production of culture, common good, development of the way men inhabit the world or civilization forms) can only create irremediable loss of work meaning and value, with consequent discomfort and loss of motivation.

Even a fundamental biological disposition for human subjectivity such as empathy can be radically hindered by the trouble to reconnect—our and other people’s—subjective lived experiences with the contexts producing them.

While commenting on Ballerini’s phenomenological interpretation (2002) from a viewpoint based on schizophrenic autism, Rossi Monti (2002) points out the need that Bartleby’s understanding of an autistic world consists “[…] of a profound empathy disorder in Edith Stein’s sense … experiencing a subject being other from us and his or her lived experience. In this sense empathy founds the intersubjective world: it allows sensing a subject similar to us, endowed with his or her life similar to ours in the perspective of world objects” (p.).

If we do not think that this disorder is the result of an intrinsic or acquired neurological deficiency, then we need to wonder in what conditions empathy—as potential biological competence of all human beings—may show up or instead be inhibited and prevented until being annihilated, in relation to evolutionary contexts and sociocultural devices.

The lawyer and other employees’ empathy is hampered because it cannot find in B. something mirroring their experience, too, in so far as they are totally plunged into and identified with the naturalness of the world as it is. They do not basically read—either in themselves or in the other—their same sufferance, empathize with themselves, understand each other. Where does the two scriveners’ discomfort with their job come from? A dysfunctional constitution? What enlivens the lawyer’s wish to understand? Compassion? And is compassion itself an original piece of information, or rather the feeling arising from our identification with the other, our feeling the other in ourselves because we identify as similar?

B.’s lack of empathy is the same as the other employees’ and the narrating lawyer’s: the foreclosure (or guilty denial) of the connection that allows us to understand and recognize everyone’s subjective and working condition and the cultural/historical device producing it.

We all live at various levels in the grey area described by Primo Levi (1986) when he describes and tries to understand inhuman—or, perhaps, too human—vicissitudes of Nazi lagers. With this expression, Levi refers to the number of open collaboration forms, also diversified for degrees and modalities, among prisoners
when they become enemies and persecutors of other fellow prisoners, rather than empathizing with them.  

This matching may seem too strong and inadequate; however, besides the horror and harshness of concentration camps, the theme remains the same: Under what conditions can human beings save their radically offended dignity, avoiding changing into their persecutors’ collaborators and executors, and thus becoming persecutors themselves?

READING LOST LETTERS ONCE AGAIN

We finally take the liberty to imagine that even Melville did not go much beyond B. in the awareness and reflexive thinking about how much the financial capitalist device was quite clearly growing and creating modern values, ideals, relation, and identity models at the time. We may doubt that at the time Melville could have at his disposal enough sociological and psychological references to fully articulate a critical thought on the consequences of the financial system on mental and relational life as well as directly on work. Like B., he must have perceived something he has translated into the story and assigned to contemporary and later readers’ interpretation: in this partial unawareness lies his value as writer and creative “witness.” Like B. he had a sharp, even if not fully logical, awareness. This is the frail and precarious letter Melville has sent us with his story, fearing, perhaps, that it could become a lost/dead letter, not daring to hope it would arrive to the consignees who, more equipped and luckier, could better interpret the connections between Leviathan, work relationships, dignity, and human creativity and find the way not to die against Moby Dick.

It was perhaps the narrator’s same (empathic?) curiosity, who, during all the years past from the publication of the story to today, has been keeping Melville’s letter alive. Reading this story as a letter sent to his contemporaries but also to us, unknown consignees—whose identity and address could not be more uncertain for the author, and, therefore, exposed to the risk to be lost and dead— has meant to me declaring myself a welcoming consignee, curious of its message, not to let it be lost, and also to dare re-interpret it from a contemporary viewpoint, with the awareness, variables, and questions of our world. In this re-interpretation of the enigma, we identify a doziness, a dilution of the awareness concerning the tragedy of some deviations typical of the financial–capitalistic system for affective life, subjectivity, and intersubjective relationships (Lo Mauro, Profita, & Ruvolo, 2012; Profita & Ruvolo, 2009, 2011): despite all, this awareness may reveal a sort of dulling, where we all struggle to escape the complaisant illusion that it should be better for us to consider our cultural, historical, and financial system the best of possible worlds still today. Illusion where each and every system crisis, including today’s persisting one, is considered as pure slip-up, which can be overcome with some adjustments, so that it is just a matter of being able to adapt to it and use it at its best to obtain benefits and privileged positions, and not questioning value-based, ideal prerequisites it is based on and that we interiorize.

How present and strong is this awareness in our scientific community of work and organization psychologists? How much is our research work taking it into
account, oriented by it, or ignoring that our contextual framework consists of the present capitalistic–financial system, considering it the best possible world and working to make it always stronger and more efficient, but without questioning it?

Is it not up to work and organization psychologists to recover reflexive skills on principles and systems that generate work relationships, the meaning of work, and the way to organize it? Following the visionary essence of ancient and recent literature history, can we develop creative ideas about new and better possible worlds?

What allows us, therefore, to focus our interpretation of Melville’s story and message on such values, ideals, and meaning referents within which human work does not expose to radical ignorance, that they cannot take place?

Following Agamben’s (1993) suggestion, a lost, and therefore dead, letter is “[…] the number of happy events which could but did not take place … if B. is a new Messiah, he does not come to redeem what was, but to save what was not” (p. 87). If “what was” is servile (more or less voluntary) work, an alienated and alienating job, its foolishness, a human being reduced to a subhuman mask of the utilitarian reason of profit, then we have to read in the opposite of these meanings the number of alternative values and ideals, “what could have been and was not.”

At this point I dare show some elements of this overthrow.

Work can have a meaning only if its primary purpose does not jeopardize the subject who carries it out, but makes him/her feel useful both for him/herself and the others. This usefulness is not primarily financial. In order for it to be recognized by mutual consent, it needs to be oriented to create common (noncommercial-consumerist) goods and common well-being, not for a few people to the detriment of many. It must have, at the same time, relevance as contribution to the development of human culture, not only in terms of well-being and improvement of life quality, but also concerning specifically human things that need to be supervised and supported: relational life, beloved ones, mental life, creativity. Economy and commercial exchange are its tool, not its purpose, as they end up becoming in a system oriented by Adam Smith’s individual financial profit and translated in the laissez-faire market system.

Recognition is subordinated to this primary purpose. Personal interest needs to be inscribed in its frame and not over it. Work must be conceived as contribution/participation to human culture.

These values/ideals can allow the subtle and essential difference between servile and service work. It acquires a meaning only in relationship with the purposes for which tasks are required, in the commonly shared and agreed framework generating a real collaboration because purposes are in the common interest. Within this consensual context there is a differentiation of roles and tasks, not idle command and supremacy. Not the mystifying request of identifying ourselves with another person’s exclusively individualistic interests.

Servile work directly derives from the fact that the company’s purpose is individual; therefore, obtaining cooperation requires a supremacy hierarchy and a (more or less voluntary) adaptive subjugation, and implies a remuneration that compensates time, competences, and struggles of those who cooperate (see the metaphor of the thankless beast).
Service work requires, instead, that between provider and customer there is a shared purpose the cooperation can be based on, not one’s profit at the detriment of the other’s instrumental use.

Dejours (2012) writes: “[…] la relation de service est comme une poche de résistance possible à la servitude,” which sums up ethics, complexity, professionalism, and reciprocal acknowledgment, not deference, not instrumentality, opposes the winner/loser logic of fraud and supremacy, “[…] elle permet un pas de coté par rapport à la dérive du néolibéralisme” (p. 179).28

We call once again on the visionary essence of literature to help us conceive a possible image of a sensible work within a company serving the common world and guarding the link of human community. This vision can be found in one of Kafka’s few positive pages, in a story titled “During the Construction of the Chinese Wall” (Ruvolo, 1995), and reveals this author’s amount of ideality, which in other works is underlying (Ferrari, 2014).

In this story, set in the mythic and far country of China, work as company oriented to the common good is symbolized in the great project of building the Chinese Wall—great for its spatial dimensions, but also because it is extended in time in a transgenerational dimension. It is represented as the source itself of orientation for both single communities and villages, and for working groups and their organization. In view of this construction, everyone trains him/herself for a profession, and it is the contribution to it that gives sense and recognition to workers’ and single people’s groups, it is for this work that the community is thankful. It does not matter if the Wall will never be completed, or never be really able to defend villages and cities from barbarians’ attacks. They do not even really know if these barbarian exist. It seems that nobody has ever directly seen them. The company, however, does not miss the task to join human beings and make them live and feel as having qualities, each one for the other, whatever their duty, job, or personal contribution is.

NOTES

1. The story was initially published on Putnam’s Monthly Magazine, and paid $5 per page, in the same way as scriveners were paid. Bartleby was paid 4 cents per single copied page (cf. Bacigalupo 1992).

2. “The novelist has the prophet’s eye, not the psychologist’s look” (Deleuze, 1989, 1993, p. 32).

3. This hypothesis is totally consistent with what Luigi Ferrari (2010) says about a “high narration,” as opposed to a “low one,” where somehow unfashionable meanings are expressed, which do not belong to the level of awareness common in a certain historical period yet, and, therefore, not cognitively recognized by the majority of that time’s readers. The philosophical paradigm of this high narration could be represented by the so-called Unfashionable Observations, as the same Nietzsche explicitly defines them.

4. This perspective, which sees the protagonist as simple witness-representative of all human beings, is precisely underlined by the complete absence of biographical data, as well as the exclamation “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, Humanity!” that ends the story.

5. It is interesting to point out how in Moby Dick, too, there is a narrating leading subject, but unlike our story, the novel starts with “Call me Ishmael.” We should also remember the utmost attention on the search for names and their mythological—biblical and symbolic meaning that Herman Melville explicitly puts in the aforementioned novel, as well as in many others.
6. “I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men’s bonds and mortgages and title-deeds” (Melville, 1853).

7. This is what Sciascia (1961) makes Don Mariano say in The Day of the Owl. “... I divide humanity, and we fill our mouth saying humanity, a beautiful word full of wind, in five categories: gli uomini [men], i mezzi'uomini [half-men], gli ominicchi [pigmies, mediocre men], i (with all due respect) pigliainculo [the losers, passed over by everyone] and quaquaraquà... [onomatopoeic definition for the lowest human level the author may imagine]. Very few are the uomini; not many the mezzi'uomini, and I would be more than happy that humanity just stopped there. But this is not the case, it even goes further down, to ominicchi: who are like children who think they are grown-ups, monkeys doing the same things as adults. ... And even more: the pigliainculo, who are becoming an army... And finally the quaquaraquà: who should live like ducks in a pond, and whose lives have no point or meaning...” (p. 89).

8. Baldini (1952) seems to get to similar conclusions when he connects lack of narration, impossibility to conceive something to hope for or believe in, lack of thought and, finally, renouncement to life: “... tragedy of a man who can talk no more, because he has nothing more to say, to fight for, to believe in ... B. closes himself in a total and absolute silence, and wait for his death: Aware of human thinking dignity, he refuses to vegetate when this fails” (my bold) (p. 142).

9. “Turkey ... after twelve o’clock, meridian ... blazed like a grate full of Christmas coals. ... Not that he was absolutely idle, or averse to business then; far from it. ... There was a strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity about him. ... All his blots upon my documents, were dropped there after twelve o’clock, meridian. Indeed, not only would he be reckless and sadly given to making blots in the afternoon, but some days he went further, and was rather noisy. ... He made an unpleasant racket with his chair; spilled his sand-box; in mending his pens, impatiently split them all to pieces, and threw them on the floor in a sudden passion; stood up and leaned over his table, boxing his papers about in a most indecorous manner, very sad to behold in an elderly man like him ... yet in the afternoon he was disposed, upon provocation, to be slightly rash with his tongue, in fact, insolent.”

10. “The 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...In short, the truth of the matter was, Nippers knew not what he wanted. Or, if he wanted any thing, it was to be rid of a scrivener’s table altogether. ... When I consider how, amid the stillness of my chambers, 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...”

11. “His father was a carter, aspiring to see before he died his son on a chair instead of a cart” (p. 12).

12. The presentation-close examination the narrator makes of the scriveners is totally individualistic. He attributes their behavioral eccentricity and awkwardness to single people’s personal characteristics, and does not connect them with each other and attribute them to a super-personal possible common reason. Just like many psychological research studies and (clinical and not clinical) interpretations do that intend to explain-justify a conduct only referring to presupposed individual characteristics (personality, past experiences, temperament, interiorized operational models, even genetic makeup and functional structure of the brain). The narrator is not, and does not want...
to be, a fine psychologist; his observation point is obviously the small business owner’s. From this viewpoint he seems quite satisfied with his employees, quite sure he can manage them, quite tolerant as far as their faults are concerned. Except for B., whose behavior can neither be explained and justified as for the other scriveners, nor leaves his conscience in peace.

14. Cf. for this reason the literature on the phenomenology of gift within commercial and work relationships (Bruni, 2010; Godbout, 2007/2008; Salsano, 2008).

15. Significant is one of HM’s comments in a letter to N. Hawtorne of 1951, where he expresses his disgust for yesmen and the value of the people who, like Hawtorne, says no!

16. The narrator himself sends us back to this tragedy, which opposes the wish (will) to the impossibility to give it space (need), when, in his effort to understand B., he says he has read “… extracts by Jonathan Edwards about will and by Joseph Priestsley on need” in order to be able to get some intelligibility sparks (p. 36).

17. It is not by chance that the lawyer-narrator’s ideal inspiration source is John Jacob Astor, an incredibly wealthy businessman: “I do not speak it in vanity, but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion” (p. 6). Very significant is the narrator’s comment about his temporary appointment as Master in Chancery, governmental office that judged inheritance conflicts, the abolition of which arouses his uncontrollable indignation because, as he writes, “It was not a very arduous office, but very pleasantly remunerative. … I consider the sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Master in Chancery, by the new Constitution, as a—premature act; inasmuch as I had counted upon a life-lease of the profits, whereas I only received those of a few short years” (p. 6).

18. This is the perspective followed by Ehrenberg’s interpretation of the psychic discomfort in contemporary society (1999, 2010) such as the single person’s guilt/powerlessness in carrying out the narcissistic ideal of autonomy he/she is dangerously and contradictorily urged on by self-fulfillment ideology.

19. B.’s awareness of his condition is shown in the very short dialogue taking place in prison between the lawyer and the scrivener, where, faced with benevolent, but hypocrite justifications of the first on the prisoner’s condition, he answers with two blunt sentences: “I know you and don’t want to say anything” and “I know where I am.” In this dialogue, Terzo (1977–78), too, gives B. a fuller awareness of the situation than his pitiful employer and significantly comments: “Death is the extreme defense of a diversity we totally ignore, but which, during the entire story, makes the lawyer reveal the hidden sides of a personality which in its selfishness, moral hypocrisy, absurdity of theories and ideas, degradation of religious values faced with financial interests is the image of the society which expresses it.”

20. Among the many references, we shall quote here those by M. Douglas in How Institutions Think (1986/1990); French psycho-sociologists (Kaes et al., 1991, 1996); Severino (2009), who refers to Heidegger’s theme of the man’s supremacy on technique and his trouble in “thinking of it”; sociologist/economist Gallino (2011), who has highlighted our times’ dominating impersonal pervasive system, he calls finitocapitalism; Recalcati (2010), who describes “a man with no unconscious” as product of contemporary late capitalistic culture. In a previous work, colleagues and I wrote: “There is a part of our unconscious which is not connected to individual refoulement, but which simply does not belong to the individual and collective perceptive field. This cultural dimension is defined by Jankélévitch (1980) méconnaissance, a “learned ignorance” of the person who “croit savoir allor qu’il ne sait pas.” We feel we know the cultural system we live in, but our understanding of the cultural identity of a personal and collective identity is only possible with difference, when we get in touch with identities belonging to different cultural systems. According to us, the most dangerous of méconnaissance is linked to the invisibility of social consequences on individual lived experiences and behaviors, exclusively interpreted in terms of intrapsychic conflicts. This invisibility has a concrete and evident character in the phenomena it generates. What replicates the status of invisibility are the ways through which they are considered and understood” (Lo Mauro et al., 2012).

21. I essentially agree with the “mimetic” interpretive viewpoint proposed by Girard (1978/1983) on the social and imaginary construction and structure of desire, able to account for the process by
means of which an object becomes object of desire since it is perceived and infected as such by the others.

22. This would justify Borges’s (1979) well-known comment, according to which “Bartleby … nos muestra esa inutilidad esencial que es una de las cotidianas ironías del universo” (p.).

23. I neither wish to idealize work, nor ignore that in any condition it can cause frustration, pain, and anxiety. I rather think that tolerating these anxieties and efforts is possible only in relation to a project, a sense/purpose being worthwhile.


25. “…the clash against concentrationary reality coincides with the unforeseen and misunderstood aggression perpetrated by a new and strange enemy, prisoner-employees, who, instead of leading you step by step, calm you, teaching you the way, hurls himself at you shouting in a language you do not know and hitting you in the face. He wants to tame you, turn off the sparkle of dignity you may still have and he has lost … the hybrid class of prisoners-employees … is the Lager framework, and together its most disturbing feature. It is a grey area with blurred contours, which separates and joins both masters’ and servants’ fields at the same time” (Levi, 1986, pp. 28–29).

26. The same can be said of money, transformed from tool into purpose, just like Severino says about technology, amazing tool at the service of life that tends to become a tool in itself and force human beings to its development. So, if money is the means to obtain everything else, it thus becomes desirable in itself.

27. This is the meaning of Honneth’s third recognition model: perceiving ourselves in connection with other people, our work as useful and significant for common life and the development of its forms (civilization). The complexity and tragedy of work values just lie here: there is often nothing at all in what we do which can authorize the request for recognition (some activities can honestly be recognized as antisocial, even if they are allowed by the law), some other times single individuals or entire groups can lose track of the connection between what we do and its value for other people.

28. Bearing in mind an unfair work relations system, Dejour points out: “Au niveau individuel, la seule marge de manoeuvre qui demeure est la volonté de ne pas servir, c’est-à-dire de suspendre son zèle à l’égard d’un système dont on pense qu’il est erroné et dont on voit les effets désastreux sur la qualité du travail” (2012). This seems to be perfectly applicable to B.’s position!

REFERENCES

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