



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Occupy Bartleby

Russ Castronovo

J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists, Volume 2, Number 2, Fall 2014, pp. 253-272 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press  
DOI: [10.1353/jnc.2014.0028](https://doi.org/10.1353/jnc.2014.0028)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jnc/summary/v002/2.2.castronovo.html>

## Occupy Bartleby

**Russ Castronovo**

University of Wisconsin-Madison

“Not yet; I am occupied.”<sup>1</sup> This negative declaration confronts the narrator of Herman Melville’s 1853 short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” when he tries to unlock the door to the Wall Street law firm that he himself owns. Bartleby’s occupation of Wall Street, his nettlesome presence for the lawyer whose business concerns “rich men’s bonds, and mortgages, and titled deeds” (635), his lack of interest in capitalist productivity, and his steadfast refusal to assent to charitable proposals that attempt to put a kind face on hierarchical wage labor all have earned Melville’s title character the distinction of being “a patron saint for Occupy.”<sup>2</sup> Bartleby’s decided preference not to consent to any feel-good plans to improve his situation provided a resonant analogy for the protestors gathered in lower Manhattan and elsewhere who were fairly certain they had never consented to the home foreclosures, bank bailouts, or austerity measures that were supposed to stabilize the economy after the 2008 financial meltdown. Like the scrivener who refuses the narrator’s charity because its ultimate goal is to justify the system for accruing wealth that the lawyer represents, the occupiers of Zuccotti Park and other public spaces proved uninterested in reforms that seemed intended merely to ensure that the financial system could go on functioning as before. “Bartleby” struck a chord with those who felt that the standard operating procedures of the millennial economy, which bestowed lavish compensation packages on poorly performing corporate officers while slashing workers’ benefits, had become not just inexcusable but unsalvageable.

The curious convergences that many people, including the activists themselves, discerned between “Bartleby” and Occupy Wall Street relied

on the formal structure of analogy. Not long after Melville's story first made its way into print, Herbert Spencer defined analogy as part of the "presumptive reasoning of daily life" that creates "an *agreement* or *likeness* between things . . . when the things are otherwise entirely different."<sup>3</sup> The risk that such equivalences might come at the expense of particularity by overriding differences is a reminder to proceed with caution when drawing an analogy. Still, Spencer's emphasis on the everydayness of analogy also indicates its centrality to acts of reading and interpretation that are held in common. Analogy is the fulcrum that connects a twenty-first-century political movement to a nineteenth-century literary text; more broadly, it is a formal mechanism that sets up a correspondence between the literary and the political in the first place. As such, the analogy that surfaces from the conjunction of "Bartleby" and Occupy provides an occasion to think about literary interpretation in public arenas.

In the post-9/11 climate where the imperatives of patriotic performance had cut back on the space of public protest, this enigmatic figure from one of the most canonical short stories in American literature seemed at once to prefigure, explain, and sanctify the tent cities and drum circles that sprang up in fall 2011 in New York City and spread to places such as Atlanta, Boston, Philadelphia, Toronto, and Oakland. Bartleby became "the first worker to occupy Wall Street," observed *The Atlantic*, when he gave up the soul-deadening labor of copying rich men's documents and settled into a nonviolent vigil at the lawyer's offices.<sup>4</sup> As "America's first slacktivist," according to a column in the *New Yorker*, Bartleby's unproductive ways anticipated the position of those at Zuccotti Park and other occupied spaces who refused to keep racing along a familiar economic treadmill.<sup>5</sup> For one observer writing in *Radical Teacher*, the example of Melville's nineteenth-century temp worker suggests that Occupy activists are more than "naysayers, slackers without an agenda" since the parallel between the protestors and this literary prototype both condenses and clarifies how the impersonal, dehumanizing efficiencies of corporate capitalism make people little more than automata.<sup>6</sup> In this context, it is worth remembering that Melville's parable of a mechanical slave, "The Bell-Tower," appears alongside "Bartleby" in *The Piazza Tales*.

While the pale specter of Bartleby never became as celebrated at Zuccotti Park as the Guy Fawkes mask made famous by *V for Vendetta*, his episodic appearance at staged public readings, on T-shirts and signs announcing "I would prefer not to," and in media commentary noting

the connections to Melville is nonetheless instructive, if not humbling, for readers who seek to make literary history relevant to contemporary situations. Melville has always been our contemporary, as Edward Said's allusions to Ahab and American empire after the attacks of September 11 suggest.<sup>7</sup> For students and critics of American literature alike, the presence of "Bartleby" on Wall Street offers a test case for considering the claims made about the political valences of reading and interpretation. People on college campuses and in university classrooms regularly understand themselves to be reading politically, alternately viewing literature as a mason's trowel that smoothes over social hierarchies or as a crowbar that pries them open. So, too, people who invoked "Bartleby" in the context of Occupy Wall Street were reading politically, but their interpretative practices relied on a very different set of ideas about reading and politics from the ones that are customarily in play among academic readers. The differences between literary criticism's loose sense of "politics" as a cultural phenomenon involving the interplay of aesthetic objects and identities and Occupy's understanding of "politics" as protest and direct action are perhaps obvious. But what remains obscure and indistinct is the matter of interpretation itself. As we will see, the use of analogy that at once creates broad correspondences and establishes insurmountable limits to affiliations among different people is at the heart of this struggle over interpretation.

While professional literary criticism tends to operate with the "assumption that epistemological positions have a *necessary* relation to political positions," the appearance of "Bartleby" in the public political contexts of the Occupy movement refused the necessary step of construing the value of the story in terms of its capacity to collapse epistemology and politics.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it often seemed in the fall of 2011 that "Bartleby" had become political precisely insofar as the text had *not* become an occasion for the display of a critical epistemology familiar to literary critics. For the most part, this story about "the most literary of literary characters" that has garnered so much criticism as to fuel a veritable industry of interpretation was rarely unpacked or interpreted on Wall Street.<sup>9</sup> More simply, it was as an analogy. Despite—or rather because of—this straightforwardness, Occupy's readings of "Bartleby" engaged a far more equivocal set of problems: How do political readings challenge singularity? How do refusals of interpretation create affinities among readers? How might analogy make literary history newly relevant? By providing an impetus for such questions, the occupation of

“Bartleby” on Wall Street provides an occasion for a postmortem, not of the movement itself, which in many respects is still alive and kicking, but of public modes of literary criticism.<sup>10</sup>

1.

The return of the oppressed scrivener to the sphere of public activism—this more active second life for a figure as impassive as Bartleby is steeped in irony—creates an opening for comparing the uses of literature in public political spaces with the reading practices developed inside the institutional spaces of literary history and criticism. In calling upon “Bartleby,” how does Occupy Wall Street interpret and make use of American literature?<sup>11</sup> If the demonstrators who invoked “Bartleby” were not interpreting or analyzing the short story in ways that were immediately recognizable, what then were they doing with it? These questions should indicate that my goal here is not to read the protests but rather to read how Occupy reads. It is an endeavor that also entails some reflection about how professionally trained readers read. Taken together, these inquiries can illuminate some important differences between activist citations of “Bartleby” and the protocols of professional literary criticism, which are often seen as proximate to political activity, if not political activity themselves.

Allusions to Bartleby were not limited to liberal-leaning magazines published on the East Coast. Deep in the heart of red-state America, the editorial page of *The Oklahoman* invoked Melville’s tale in order to depict Occupy protestors as petulant and uncompromising. Bartleby incurred the disdain of the newspaper’s editors, who saw the scrivener as foolish and spiteful in his rejection of the charity that society extends to him. “Ultimately he’s taken to prison,” writes the newspaper in a wonderful example of how use of the passive obscures the agents of incarceration, “and dies of starvation because he prefers not to eat the food that was offered him.” Here, the invocation of literature served up a condemnation of Occupy Wall Street’s “childish and sometimes violent behavior,” which continued even though folks as well intentioned as Melville’s lawyer had essayed to understand the inarticulate demands of the protestors.<sup>12</sup> Like Bartleby, the rabble-rousers associated with Occupy preferred not to meet even halfway those charitable souls—presumably the police, the corporate media, government officials—offering to help.

While it is tempting to debate the relative merits of these interpretative uses of an American literary classic, the broader and more salient point is that such readings deploy literature politically in ways that

are both overt and unapologetic. The public appearances of “Bartleby” in 2011–12 indicate that literature can have a political utility that is not allusive but direct: this conviction spans a spectrum of publications from *Radical Teacher* to the conservative editorial page of Oklahoma’s largest newspaper. At first glance, not much in this claim will surprise critics, teachers, and students of American literature, who have long insisted that the field is deeply political. In the wake of New Criticism, readers devoted themselves to examining the relationship between “ideology and classic American literature,” reconsidering the American Renaissance, reassessing “the culture of sentiment,” and interrogating the “cultures of United States imperialism,” simply to invoke four landmark editorial projects that have variously recuperated and uncovered the historical, and therefore political, dimensions of the field.<sup>13</sup> Even before Occupy Wall Street, David Palumbo-Liu in 2008 called upon literary scholars to undertake “the occupation of formalism” by reintroducing “social experience into the study of literary texts.”<sup>14</sup> Playing with the idea of occupation as at once a profession, an occupied territory, and a plurality of “reading publics,” Palumbo-Liu took stock of critical developments that had allowed readers to overrun the serene enclaves of “discretely national literary objects” that until recently had kept social forces at bay.<sup>15</sup> Now that the barricades had fallen, Palumbo-Liu urged readers to add another dimension to the idea of occupation by construing it also as “a space of co-habitation” that places texts and their readers at the juncture where local interpretations attain global significance.<sup>16</sup>

When it comes to Melville, social conflict and political contestation have long been part of the critical picture. Placing “Bartleby” in the context of the Vietnam War and social protests of the sixties, H. Bruce Franklin decidedly read Melville’s story against the academic grain by examining how the worker who will not work becomes a criminal in the eyes of society. A bracing and unapologetic lesson about class politics comes into focus: “Melville . . . reveals that for all people—except of course the rich—not to work is a dangerous crime.”<sup>17</sup> “Bartleby” has remained at the political vanguard, as the scrivener’s multiple appearances in the work of Slavoj Žižek attest, by presenting a specter of negative subjectivity that cannot be allayed. “Bartlebian politics,” Žižek writes, are impatient with reforms and agitate instead for systemic transformations by refusing all ameliorative measures, no matter whether they rest on the consensus liberalism of representative democracy, the pleasures of commodity capitalism, or the shallow environmental activism found in

carrying a reusable bag to the supermarket.<sup>18</sup> In the wake of such readings, it is hard to imagine returning to “an academic Melville,” one who somehow exists apart from the social conflicts of his era or ours.<sup>19</sup>

“Bartleby,” however, has recently become something of a touchstone for philosophically inclined readers who find that Melville’s obsessions with negative affect and inaction disclose only a murky politics whose activism is at best a metaphysical conundrum. Indeed, as the subject of Branka Arsić’s *Passive Constitutions, or, 7½ Bartleby*, the copyist illustrates the heady problem of thinking about the activity of thinking itself. Her version of Bartleby seems stuck in the mode of what Giorgio Agamben in “Bartleby, or On Contingency” identifies as the “perfect potentiality” of a figure who does not give in to the expectations of ontology.<sup>20</sup> Bartleby’s “unnervingly passive form of dissent” is the centerpiece of Sianne Ngai’s cabinet of emotional curiosities.<sup>21</sup> Ultimate meaning is anything but fixed or certain since the “*political equivocality*” of Bartleby produces neither catharsis nor resolute opposition but rather fitful feelings such as disgust that invite and repel at the same time.<sup>22</sup> Such readings constitute one half of a split, described by Nancy Ruttenberg, between critics who read the story philosophically and those who dwell on the “cultural-historical specificities of context.”<sup>23</sup> These seemingly “segregated interpretative modes,” however, show more commonality than is generally acknowledged since, according to Ruttenberg, the abstruse concern with the “conversion of absolutes (Being without predicate . . .) into contingencies (. . . as a predicate of being)” marks a juncture that is “particular to the antebellum United States.”<sup>24</sup> Even if the tenor of Ruttenberg’s rapprochement of contrasting interpretative modes still privileges a philosophical register over the material accents of old as well as newer historicisms, her emphasis on Bartleby as a minimalist character who embodies uncertainty helps explain the befuddlement that often met the Bartlebian politics of Occupy Wall Street.

Unsure of what to make of a protest that did not wrap up its message in a neat package for the evening news, the media coverage of Occupy Wall Street exemplified this sort of equivocality. The politics of negation confounded pundits, who expressed irritation at figuring out how to complete the predicate to “I prefer not to.” What exactly was being negated? The occupiers camped out in St. James Park in Toronto and the people working with the Occupy Wall Street Library at Zuccotti Park registered no such ambivalence when they each staged public readings of Melville’s story. The political aspect of American literature

acquired unexpected exigency when it became wrapped up with demonstrators refusing to assent to anything other than their right to occupy public space. The activists at Occupy Wall Street who became readers of Melville invoked literature for its demonstrative power as an analogy, not for its enigmatic qualities that solicit interpretation. The tale may call for interpretation, but Melville does not satisfy the desire for determinate meaning; Occupy Wall Street might invite plenty of media observers looking for a list of demands, but its “blank Bartlebyan inscrutability . . . came to constitute its greatest power” by consistently resisting the pressure to become legible in accepted ways.<sup>25</sup> In this context, “Bartleby” is not an artifact to be explained; its significance is already self-evident by way of analogy. As a patron saint for saying “no” to Wall Street, Bartleby sanctifies a movement whose refusal to enumerate a set of goals and principles expressed a contemporary politics of negation.

In remarking upon the striking parallels between the Wall Street copyist who prefers not to quit his employer’s office and the protestors who refused to abandon a privately owned public park, media commentators were, in fact, only repeating a parallel first articulated by the protestors themselves. Melville was not imposed upon the occupiers of Zuccotti Park in the same way that students in an introductory course to American literature are given a syllabus and assigned readings. Soon after the start of the protests, “I prefer not to” evolved from an arcane literary allusion into a familiar slogan. A blogger on the Occupy Wall Street Library site enthused that the similarity between Melville’s lawyer-narrator and the corporate lawyers of lower Manhattan made her “want to give Melville a high-five.”<sup>26</sup> Volunteers staffing the bulletin board, folding tables, and boxes of books that constituted the Occupy Wall Street Library could be seen wearing T-shirts printed with the politely phrased statement of defiance about preferring not to. Bartleby’s negative declaration echoed with demonstrators who found it difficult to see anything to assent to in a society structured by the severe inequities that had created the 99 percent. For people wary of slogans and their inherent capacity to simplify political positions so that they can be summarized and managed, “I would prefer not to” suggested an unwillingness to consent to whatever solutions those inside the system of banking, corporate finance, indeed, capitalism as a whole, were proposing. The anarchists, debt-ridden students, and, of course, the radical librarians who selected “Bartleby” as the text for public reading at the encampment did so because the stance of “preferring not to” resonated

with the refusal to make demands and get with the program of liberal reform that, at least since the Clinton administration, had left banks and other financial institutions freer to operate without regulation or oversight. Justin Taylor, author of *The Gospel of Anarchy* and one of the organizers who staged the reading of *Bartleby* at Zuccotti Park on November 11, 2011, explained that the choice of Melville's tale was meant "to invoke the long history of refusal that informs and enlivens OWS . . . [by] asserting that the present state of affairs is intolerable and cannot be allowed to continue."<sup>27</sup> Thanks to activists adept at forming coalitions and making connections, *Bartleby* was once again, a hundred and fifty years after his first occupation, haunting the legal—but nonetheless still inequitable—corridors of high finance.

But did Melville's revenant have anything to say? For Jeremi Suri, a history professor who often takes the position of a public intellectual, "the Achilles heel" of Occupy Wall Street was that it lacked a "narrative." Moreover, any story that the occupiers might tell, should they make intelligible demands, would be inauthentic since anyone who was truly "downtrodden," to use the word that came up in Kai Ryssdal's interview with Suri on *Marketplace*, would be working simply to make ends meet and would not "have time" to protest in the first place. In this context, Occupy's choice of "*Bartleby*" proves Suri's point that the protests are steeped in the negativity of being "against something" without "offering any cohesive or coherent alternative."<sup>28</sup> But this contention also forces Suri and other observers to occupy the position of Melville's narrator, who tries but fails to provide a "cohesive or coherent" narrative that might explain the sources of his employee's alienation. Indeed, the protests at Zuccotti Park invited scores of commentators, who, frustrated by the movement's recalcitrance to make recognizable demands or propose specific solutions, attempted to provide their own narratives for Occupy Wall Street and to put its agenda into words as though the people holding signs about the 99 percent, student debt, the bailout of the banks, and the salaries of hedge-fund managers were incapable of expressing themselves.

Instead of reading Occupy Wall Street in an attempt to recover the narrative that it presumably could not articulate for itself, it is more instructive to examine how Occupy reads literature and what its methods tell us about reading in public. For starters, reading in public is rarely seen as a redeeming activity. As one of the dispatches that make up *Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America* reports, a cop explained the growing ruckus on Wall Street with a contemptuous reference to the

sort of textual exegesis commonly associated with academic literary criticism: the protestors “read some books in college and now they think they know how to fix the world.”<sup>29</sup> Do readings that the protestors’ signs deployed “guerilla semiotics” associated with conceptual art give inadvertent credence to this view that the movement sacrificed practical solutions to the ironic niceties of interpretation?<sup>30</sup> In his critical postmortem of Occupy Wall Street, Thomas Frank opines that the movement and its champions read too much into its own cagey refusal to issue demands. Dismayed that several book-length treatments of Occupy Wall Street appearing in 2012 make “sweeping claims” that “just about everything it does is brilliantly, inventively, mind-blowingly people-empowering,” Frank adopts a more skeptical stance and charges that the demonstrators too often overlooked the real political content of the moment—questionable lending practices and other predations of Ayn Rand-style capitalism—to dwell narcissistically on their own forms of consensus building. In building a democratic movement, it does not “require poststructuralism-leading-through anarchism to understand how to reverse” the disastrous economic policies that paved the way for the Great Recession.<sup>31</sup> If Frank’s impatience for the “pseudointellectual gibberish” that he saw infesting Occupy Wall Street bears an even remote resemblance to the cop’s irritation at college-educated young people who have read a few books, the overlap suggests a view in which reading appears misplaced and out of its cloistered environment when it comes up against the complex and bitter realities of Wall Street.

From this perspective, a penchant for books and literary allusion made the occupiers comparable to Bartleby. For many, all that could be discerned from the activity of reading at Occupy Wall Street was that the protestors preferred not to do the hard work of taking recognizable steps toward implementing change. The complaint against Occupy Wall Street was not merely that its adherents were reading incorrectly by holding forth in the faded idiom of poststructuralism, nor was it that their readings displayed all the self-satisfaction of an undergraduate paper reading too much into the whiteness of the whale. The problem seemed to be that Occupy Wall Street was reading at all since reading implied the opposite of concerted action and realistic decision-making.

But how exactly was Occupy Wall Street reading? How had activists occupied “Bartleby” in the name of the 99 percent? Most invocations of Melville’s short story in this context were not what literary critics would recognize as original or incisive interpretation, nor did they exhibit any of the “mind-blowing” qualities that Frank sees adoring

writers misrecognizing in Occupy's internal processes. Discussions of "Bartleby" tended toward plot summary, paraphrase, and a cataloging of similarities. "The parallels between Bartleby's peculiar form of rebellion and the protestors of Occupy Wall Street should be obvious," stated the blogger at themillions.com.<sup>32</sup> But in case they weren't, she followed up by quoting passages from the scrivener's confrontation with his employer and juxtaposing them to observations about the protests. A post on the webpage of the Occupy Wall Street Library suggested that the phrase "I would prefer not to" resonated with the broader ethos of the movement by evoking "something similar to the combination of exactitude and vagueness that has made the phrase 'Occupy Wall Street' a catalyst for affiliation and critique."<sup>33</sup> On the surface, these parallels, if not overly nuanced, seem forthright and unironic in ways that fit with what Todd Gitlin characterizes as the overall sincerity of Occupy Wall Street. "The premium style was *earnest* . . . Earnestness was the new counterculture," writes Gitlin in *Occupy Nation*.<sup>34</sup> On the surface, it might seem that Occupy emerged organically to practice what critics have called surface reading.

As opposed to interpretative practices that drill down past layers of ideology and repression in an effort to reveal hidden meanings, surface reading attends to the abundance of significances found across the flat contours of everyday language and practice.<sup>35</sup> Was the cool reception given to one occupier's suggestion that the movement had to find the "nerve centers" where "the semi-secret non-governmental organizations" operated a rejection of analytic depth bound up with conspiratorial paranoia?<sup>36</sup> Perhaps. At Zuccotti Park, librarians, graduate students, and bloggers read across the surfaces of "Bartleby" in an effort to extend its range of meaning horizontally so that the story of a forlorn office worker might provide an analogy for the 99 percent. If they stuck to the shallows, they did so because the little that the lawyer knows about his employee ("I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man" [635]) keeps Bartleby forever a cipher. Despite the lawyer's final desperate attempt to pathologize Bartleby as a psychological casualty of a dead-end government job at the Dead Letter Office in Washington, DC, his protest remains inexplicable and therefore unresolvable by either charity or the welfare-to-work schemes proposed by the lawyer. Whatever may ail Bartleby, the lawyer is not able to attribute his malaise to personal, private afflictions such as failing eyesight or the confinement of city life that traveling "the country collecting bills for merchants" would almost certainly cure.

Likewise, whatever may have ailed the crowds that occupied public spaces for months in fall 2011 and winter 2012, whether it was “frustration at a dying capitalist system” or “bitter anger at Wall Street’s theft of public money,” their spirited opposition would not allow for a single remedy or quick fix.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the tendency to stick to the surfaces where the protestors echoed Bartleby’s “prefer not to” or gestured to Henry David Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” as a sort of footnote, Occupy Wall Street’s readings of nineteenth-century American literature were hardly uncritical. As Michael Warner has argued, modes of reading that academics regularly deem naive and unsophisticated, including those built on intense identification and enthusiasm, “really [are] critical in some sense or another.” In contrast to a professional habitus that prizes “an expression of distance from a text that must be objectified as a benchmark of distancing,” many people identify with literary characters whose triumphs and struggles somehow echo their own.<sup>38</sup> And, in the case of a Melville short story subtitled “A Story of Wall-Street,” erstwhile students of American literature found connections right on the surface. Like Bartleby, they felt treated like pieces of inhuman office equipment, useful for entering sales figures, compiling quarterly reports, and, of course, copying. Like Bartleby, they were expected to be “cheerfully industrious” (638) by giving their gleeful consent to a system that had already demanded their obedience. Most dramatic of all convergences, the protestors, like Bartleby, preferred not to participate in the normative political processes in which reforms are granted only insofar as they keep the status quo intact, humming at its usual productive pace. This negative affect entailed a decided preference not to formulate a list of demands since “demands conferred legitimacy on the authorities.”<sup>39</sup> From the media sidelines came the repeated questions: Why can’t the movement prioritize a list of demands? What specific ideas for reform are they backing? What exactly does Occupy Wall Street want? By and large, the protestors preferred not to say.

## 2.

What the protestors did assert, however, was an analogy between their experiences and Bartleby’s. But this assertion only begs the further question: what sort of insight or critical knowledge does analogy produce? In eliciting a likeness between concepts or things and then stopping at this point as it so often does, analogy would not seem to offer an especially nuanced perspective. As anyone who took the SAT

exam when it confronted students with a section on analogies knows (e.g., “medicine : illness” is to “law : anarchy,” or is it “love : treason”?), the work of figuring out analogies really doesn’t tell us much of anything about health, war, affection, or other concepts that we are asked to compare. From the ancient Greek *ἀναλογία* for proportion, the idea of *analogon* also conveyed ideas of correspondence useful for thinking about mathematical relationships as well as grammatical similarities involving word inflection and derivation. In this sense, analogies help us to compare ostensibly different forms and search for the ways in which they might in fact be equivalent, corresponding, and even in harmony with one another. Aristotle employs analogy to compare political structures and, in a move that would no doubt delight Occupy Wall Street, first uses analogy in *Politics* to discuss how different Greek societies rely on a permanent underclass to cultivate their lands. Later, however, he creates a murkier picture by drawing an analogy between “pure democracy” and oligarchies: under a system where everyone has a voice, public magistrates become superfluous in a way that is “analogous” to their irrelevance in an autocratic regime.<sup>40</sup> While it may seem that only a surface reader could conclude that democracy and tyranny share certain logics (ana + logos), Aristotle argues that these two governmental forms are linked by a common fundamental attitude that rests on a deeply equivocal disposition toward popular rule.

When things belong to “different genera,” finding an “identical attribute” can prove difficult, at times requiring new turns of language via metaphor and metonymy that can span the differences. The further apart the terms seem—Aristotle gives the example of knowledge and sensation—the greater the difficulty of drawing an analogy. In such cases where “the differences are entirely obvious,” critical practice is required to discern deeper affinities.<sup>41</sup> The organizers who staged a public reading of Melville’s short story at Zuccotti Park displayed more than the analytic skill that Aristotle deemed necessary for making an analogy. They also revealed that analogy is itself a figure of occupation in which each side of the comparison occupies the space of the other. If the protestors are in the same space as *Bartleby*, it is because they can see themselves within the contexts of nineteenth-century American literary history. If literary critics gravitate to Melville’s story, it is perhaps because *Bartleby*’s discarded status uncannily analogizes their own sense of marginalization as humanities scholars. And, finally, if *Bartleby* is translated to the setting of a twenty-first-century protest, it is because his barebones negation offers a literary precedent for making “a

formal gesture of rejection that is initially more important than any positive content,” to cite Žižek’s reading of Occupy.<sup>42</sup> The reach of analogy in these situations registers the difficulty but also the potential of connecting the “cultural politics” that frequently pops up in academic parlance with the politics of occupation.

The discussions surrounding the encampment at Wall Street visibly demonstrated that occupation entails occupying linguistic space. Occupy changed “public perception and language itself,” gushed the editor of Zuccotti Park Press in a headnote to Noam Chomsky’s pamphlet *Occupy*.<sup>43</sup> Connecting the protests to the classical trope of *occupatio*, W. J. T. Mitchell describes a linguistic occupation that utilizes “the tactic of anticipating an adversary’s arguments by preempting them.” The trope of *occupatio* turns upon an awareness that the “rhetoric of public space” is ripe for the taking because it is open to all who participate in debating public questions. Activists wrested “occupation” away from its militaristic connotations so that it began to accrue new meanings associated with “the reclaiming of public space by masses of disenfranchised people.”<sup>44</sup>

In the process, Occupy Wall Street also injected new meanings into “Bartleby,” transforming the scrivener’s negation into an assertion that the system, whether it is a mid-nineteenth-century society seeking to excuse the isolating tendencies of capitalism with convenient demonstrations of private charity or a twenty-first-century order that does not even bother to make excuses for lavishing bailouts, corporate tax credits, and other governmental charity upon financial institutions, should not be critiqued merely so that it can be rebooted in more or less the same form. The signs that read “I Lost My Job but I Found an Occupation” speak to Bartleby’s refusal to copy, making manifest how the determination to be unproductive can produce an unappeasable questioning about the desirability of working to reproduce structural inequalities. Bartleby may have lost his position as a copyist, but he certainly finds a calling by remaining in place, even after the workplace relocates elsewhere when the lawyer, in an attempt to find a space safe from conflict or protest, leases a new office. Bartleby’s declaration at this moment “that he still preferred to abide with” the narrator, itself a singular statement of desire not prefaced by the negative, suggests an attachment to this immobility. No wonder the lawyer fears “his perpetual occupancy” (663).

When, after a change of offices, the lawyer is asked about the former employee he left behind in the same way one might forget a coat

rack tucked behind a door, he states, “The man you allude to is nothing to me—he is no relation or apprentice of mine, that you should hold me responsible for him” (665). Among the possible connections that the lawyer seeks to deny, from the obligations of employee training to the claims of common humanity, he above all wishes to foreclose the possibility of “relation” that analogical thinking creates. In this light, it is hardly a coincidence that foreclosure served as one of the primary instruments employed by banks and other mortgage holders in response to the Great Recession. In the lawyer’s universe, *Bartleby* remains an oddity, a singularity, with no “relation” or connection to any genera. If an analogy could be made between the two, the critical upshot would reveal points of structural similarity that might connect *Bartleby*’s alienation to the lawyer’s comfortable existence. Likewise, if others, say, the 99 percent, were like *Bartleby*, then it seems worthwhile entertaining the possibility that the arts of occupation might have a sort of canonical status in American society. To speak of Occupy Wall Street in this way is not to take a swipe, as did the conservative pundits who kept seeing the ghosts of hippies and dope at Zuccotti Park, at the movement’s presumed orthodoxy that required adherence to the bible of 1960s protest, but to entertain the possibility that this type of demonstration might become a regular feature of the social landscape.

The connection between “*Bartleby*” and the protests rests on “an imperfect analogy,” as the Occupy Wall Street Library blog acknowledged at the time.<sup>45</sup> Still, enough ironies resonated to suggest that the story might offer an incisive commentary. The lawyer’s initial assessment of his new employee as a “valuable acquisition” seemed all too familiar to people who enjoyed security within the corridors of capitalism only insofar as they, like *Bartleby*, exhibited “steadiness . . . freedom from all dissipation . . . incessant industry . . . great stillness” (649)—although not even this ideal of docility could save workers after the financial collapse of 2008. The most critical aspect of the analogy lay in the “no” that *Bartleby* speaks to the Wall Street lawyer and by extension to the system that he upholds and represents. If “consent is the currency of capitalism,”<sup>46</sup> then *Bartleby*’s unwillingness to treat his employer “with submission,” as the other clerks in the lawyer’s offices repeatedly do, signaled that compulsory fantasies about getting ahead and the work ethic might not be so compulsory after all. Analogies let those who make them feel that they are not alone by demonstrating that their situation finds its echo elsewhere. Analogies place things in relation to one another, pointing to common structures that allow for extrapolation. In

political terms, the logic of resemblance widens the struggle by uncovering deep and perhaps unexpected affinities among those who dare to prefer something other than the standard remedies proposed at a time of crisis. To be sure, the core assertion of Occupy Wall Street, “We are the 99 percent,” is based on the analogy that the crowds gathered at a park in lower Manhattan, whose numbers fluctuated in response to weather, police presence, and media coverage, shared the same concerns as the vast majority of the population that also felt dispossessed and disenfranchised by the normal everyday operations of banks, mortgage companies, and other financial institutions.

When Aristotle sets up the analogy that “as is a calm in the sea, so is windlessness in the air” (*Topics*), he may have had more ephemeral structures in mind than Lehman Brothers or JP Morgan Chase, but his overall insight is that the discovery of likeness allows people to move from the particular to the genus. The ancient metaphysical sense of analogy in which “there would be no analogy without the common form, nor without the common relation,”<sup>47</sup> carries a contemporary political charge that enables any of the particular cases, from that of an antebellum law clerk to that of US Marine sergeant Shamar Thomas, a veteran of Iraq, who shouted at police that there was no honor in beating up Occupy protestors, to find commonality across a wider population. Their situation was not *sui generis* but a matter of the genera, that is, a general social body composed of all those disgusted by the steady trend toward income inequality that had continued apace during the most severe economic crisis in a generation. In other words, although the lawyer desperately seeks to understand and fix Bartleby as a singular individual, the copyist forever remains a mute totem of a general condition that cannot be placated by good intentions or half measures. Three times Bartleby tells the lawyer, “I am not particular.” The political potential of analogy disorients the lawyer when he conflates Election Day with the only slightly less momentous question of whether Bartleby will cease to occupy his offices. The lawyer confesses to a momentary confusion, working hard to repress the similarity that has popped into his head: “The words I had overhead bore no reference to Bartleby but to the success or nonsuccess of some candidate for the mayoralty” (659). Even the occupiers of Wall Street might say that on this particular point the lawyer protests too much. He endeavors to prove that the crisis of Bartleby bears absolutely no analogical relation, that no common forms or feelings link the copyist’s occupation to the protocols of representative democracy. By not acknowledging the possibility that Bartleby’s

particular malaise might have applicability elsewhere, the lawyer already has Bartleby walled off in a conceptual prison.

### 3.

So far this essay has argued that the occupation of “Bartleby” stages its critique by employing analogy to discover structural similarities. As an example of the potential exigency of American literary criticism, the occupation of “Bartleby” speaks to the urgency of reading analogically in an effort to locate similarities between a sphere of books and criticism and a world in crisis.<sup>48</sup> But this public political reading of American literature also comes with the warning that analogy can only be pushed so far. The surface gesture of remarking upon the commonalities between a fictional nineteenth-century office worker and the occupiers of Wall Street creates an appeal to commonality across social spaces. The problem with this reading is that it has already been anticipated by the lawyer, who simultaneously enlarges and reduces his entire encounter with the scrivener to an intolerable analogy. “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!” rhapsodizes the narrator in the last words of the story (672). He concludes by setting up an analogical relation that follows the classic formula of A : B in which Bartleby represents the condition of the entire human species.

What a great guy the lawyer turns out to be in the end! Although he has previously protested that his former employee is “no relation . . . of mine,” here the narrator at last sees the light, which, one might note, Bartleby himself was never able to see since his desk looked out upon a wall of the adjacent building just three feet away. Upon hearing a rumor of Bartleby’s experiences at the Dead Letter Office in Washington, DC, before coming to work on Wall Street, the lawyer quickly converts these particulars into a generalized appeal on behalf of the entirety of humanity. As someone who has been chummy with John Jacob Astor and other members of the 1 percent, the lawyer tries to defuse Bartleby’s protest by exalting him but also viewing him as nothing more than an emblem of a universal human condition. By thinking in terms of genera, the lawyer forgets the specifics of thwarted love and undelivered charity that he imagines languishing in the dead letters stored in the back-room of some government office. With these final words, “Bartleby” serves as the narrator’s own dead letter: all his thoughts about creating meaningful connections with humanity have no particular addressee or destination.

In short, the lawyer employs analogy not to search out affinities but to effect the displacement of underlings who might merit consideration. He diffuses Bartleby's repeated negations into a generalized lament so anodyne that it might apply to anyone, which is precisely the point. Does the lawyer outflank Occupy Wall Street in its use of critical analogy? Put still more sharply, is the "humanity" that becomes the subject of his final meditation the same thing as the 99 percent that the Occupy movement invoked? To pose such questions is not to make the accusation that the use of analogy on Wall Street is prone to such excessive extrapolation and similarity that everyone ultimately is included so that no targets of critique remain. Rather, it suggests the need to remain alert lest we make a mathematical mistake by rounding up 99 percent to 100 percent in the belief that the analogies between Melville and Occupy, between Bartleby and humanity, are somehow complete or perfect. Just because Bartleby says he is "not particular," it does not mean that he should be entirely encapsulated by the lawyer's analogy. Melville's story ultimately is not so much about analogy as it is about the limits of analogy. The 99 percent represents the breakdown of analogy, the point beyond which reading for commonality reconciles the particularity of conflict and division to anemic meditations about humanity.

The failure of analogy to encompass 100 percent of everything nonetheless preserves a space and occasion for negative differentiation. The lawyer and his society can never fully minister to whatever it is that ails Bartleby. His negation keeps open other ways of being. Just as surely, media commentators, elected officials, and liberal reformers can never address the extent, both in terms of range and profundity, of all that drew people to Zuccotti Park. The negativity of Occupy thus becomes a refusal to limit politics to a recognizable register. This remainder that falls outside analogy's reach suggests a form of protest that cannot be assuaged.

## Notes

1. Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street," in *Herman Melville: Pierre or, The Ambiguities; Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile; The Piazza Tales; The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade; Uncollected Prose; Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 659. All further citations are to this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

2. Nina Martyris "A Patron Saint for Occupy," *New Republic*, October 15, 2011, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/politics/96276/nina-martyris-ows-and-bartleby-the-scrivener>, accessed May 8, 2014.

3. Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology* (London: Longman, 1855), 166. See also Todd Carmody, "Rehabilitating Analogy," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 431–39.

4. Jonathan D. Greenberg, "Occupy Wall Street's Debt to Melville," *The Atlantic*, April 30, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/04/occupy-wall-streets-debt-to-melville/256482/>, accessed May 8, 2014.

5. See Martyris, "A Patron Saint for Occupy."

6. Regina Dilgen, "The Original Occupy Wall Street: Melville's 'Bartleby, the Scrivener,'" *Radical Teacher* 93 (2012): 54.

7. In an essay from *The Observer* published September 15, 2001, Said writes, "Inevitably, then, collective passions are being funnelled into a drive for war that uncannily resembles Captain Ahab in pursuit of Moby Dick, rather than what is going on, an imperial power injured at home for the first time, pursuing its interests systematically in what has become a suddenly re-configured geography of conflict, without clear borders, or visible actors." See Edward Said, "Islam and the West Are Inadequate Banners," *The Observer*, September 15, 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/sep/16/september11.terrorism3>, accessed April 6, 2014. For more on Said's comparison in the context of Melville criticism and American literary history, see Robert S. Levine, "Melville and Americanness: A Problem," *Leviathan* (forthcoming).

8. John Guillory, "The Sokal Affair and the History of Criticism" *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Winter 2002): 475.

9. Nancy Ruttenberg, "'The Silhouette of a Content': 'Bartleby' and American Literary Specificity," in *Melville and Aesthetics*, ed. Samuel Otter and Geoffrey Sanborn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 139. On the "Bartleby Industry," see Andrew Knighton, "The Bartleby Industry and Bartleby's Idleness," *ESQ* 53, no. 2 (2007): 184–215. In his assessment of Dan McCall's *The Silence of Bartleby*, Douglas Anderson also observes that the text's interpretative refusals have generated a steady stream of critical interpretation ("Re-Reading *The Silence of Bartleby*," *American Literary History* 20, no. 3 [Summer 2008]: 483).

10. Occupy Wall Street is perhaps most visible today as a web presence. See, for instance, the blogs appearing on [occupywallstreet.net](http://occupywallstreet.net) and [occupywallst.org](http://occupywallst.org). It has also adapted to new crises, as the work of Occupy Sandy suggests. For a critique of the metamorphosis of Occupy Wall Street into Occupy Sandy, see Jonathan Poore, "Bartleby's Occupation: 'Passive Resistance' Then and Now," *Nonsite.Org* 9, May 1, 2013, <http://nonsite.org/article/bartlebys-occupation-passive-resistance-then-and-now>, accessed January 15, 2014. It's notable that Poore's reading of the movement focuses on Bartleby and the many philosophical-political commentaries he has inspired.

11. Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" also appeared in the spaces of Occupy. See also Poore, "Bartleby's Occupation," and Bernard E. Harcourt, "Political Disobedience," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Autumn 2012): 33–55, on civil (and political) disobedience in the context of Occupy.

12. "Goal Remains Fuzzy for Occupy Protestors," *The Oklahoman*, November 6, 2011, <http://newsok.com/goal-remains-fuzzy-for-occupy-protesters/article/3619991#ixzz1cx2jySOA>, accessed December 12, 2012.

13. See Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen, eds., *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *The Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease, eds., *The American Renaissance Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Shirley Samuels, ed., *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

14. David Palumbo-Liu, "The Occupation of Form: (Re)theorizing Literary History," *American Literary History* 20, no. 4 (2008): 816.

15. *Ibid.*, 820, 822.

16. *Ibid.*, 815.

17. H. Bruce Franklin, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 33. These contexts also included Watergate since Franklin took pains to comment that in his study of the artist and criminal he was "not, of course, talking about the novels of Spiro Agnew and E. Howard Hunt, or the memoirs of Richard Nixon, men whose crimes are obviously more significant than their art, but of the art produced out of the sufferings inflicted by such men, their social class, and the political economy they defend" (Franklin xxiii).

18. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 180.

19. Franklin, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist*, 38. But see Knighton on "the Bartleby Industry," which, paradoxically, has proven quite adept at producing copious amounts of critical commentary on Melville's tale about unproductiveness.

20. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 247. Hester Blum describes how Arsic's meditative approach to "Bartleby" problematizes "the *activity*—in all senses of the word—of thought" to the extent where it gets tripped up by its combination of allusiveness and elusiveness ("Melville, Three Ways," *Studies in the Novel* 41 [Fall 2009]: 373).

21. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

22. *Ibid.* See also 332–54.

23. Ruttenberg, "The Silhouette of a Content," 139.

24. *Ibid.*, 138, 147–48.

25. Greenberg, "Occupy Wall Street's Debt to Melville."

26. Michele Hardesty, "I Would Prefer Not To," <http://peopleslibrary.wordpress.com/>, October 26, 2011, accessed March 17, 2012.

27. Maryann Yin, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" Reading at Occupy Wall Street," November 11, 2011, [http://www.mediabistro.com/galleycat/bartleby-the-scrivener-reading-at-occupy-wall-street\\_b42052](http://www.mediabistro.com/galleycat/bartleby-the-scrivener-reading-at-occupy-wall-street_b42052), accessed March 27, 2012.

28. "What the Occupy Protestors Want," *Marketplace*, October 3, 2011, <http://www.marketplace.org/topics/business/occupy-wall-st/what-occupy-wall-street-protesters-want>, accessed June 3, 2012.

29. Astra Taylor, Keith Cessen, et al., eds., *Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America* (London: Verso, 2011), 19.

30. See Barry Schwabsky, "Signs of Protest: Occupy's Guerilla Semiotics," *The Nation*, January 2, 2012, <http://www.thenation.com/article/165144/signs-protest-occupys-guerilla-semiotics#>, accessed April 9, 2012.

31. Thomas Frank, "To the Precinct Station: How Theory Met Practice . . . and Drove It Absolutely Crazy," *The Baffler* 21 (2012), [http://www.thebaffler.com/past/to\\_the\\_precinct\\_station](http://www.thebaffler.com/past/to_the_precinct_station), accessed May 8, 2014.

32. Hannah Gersen, "Bartleby's Occupation of Wall Street," Themillions.com, October 11, 2011, <http://www.themillions.com/2011/10/bartleby%E2%80%99s-occupation-of-wall-street.html>, accessed February 22, 2102.

33. Hardesty, "I Would Prefer Not To."

34. Todd Gitlin, *Occupy Nation: The Roots, the Spirit, and the Promise of Occupy Wall Street* (New York: Itbooks, 2012), 64, 66.

35. See Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus for the opposition between surface and depth (or symptomatic) reading ("The Way We Read Now," *Representations* 108, no. 1 [2009]: 1–21). But, as Rita Felski demonstrates, there is likely more continuity between these two styles of reading than in generally assumed ("Digging Down and Standing Back," *After Critique: A Special Issue of ELN* 51, no. 2 [Fall/Winter 2013]: 7–23).

36. Taylor et al., *Occupy!*, 5.

37. Frankie Cook, "Standing Up against the Bailout," <http://socialistworker.org/2008/09/29/standing-against-the-bailout>, September 29, 2008, accessed March 1, 2013; "Resist. Insist. Stand Together. Build. Never Surrender." *OccupyTheory.com*, February 16, 2013, accessed February 17, 2013.

38. Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading," in *Polemic, Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 32, 20.

39. Gitlin, *Occupy Nation*, 110. For more nuance on this point, see Harcourt, "Political Disobedience," who contends that Occupy Wall Street rejected politics as usual, including the time-honored tradition of civil disobedience, which "accepts the legitimacy of the political structure and of our institutions but resists the moral authority of the resulting laws" (33).

40. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.html>, accessed May 7, 2014.

41. Aristotle, *Topics*, trans. W.A. Pickard-Cambridge, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/topics.html>, accessed May 7, 2014.

42. Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (New York: Verso, 2012), 83.

43. Greg Ruggiero, "Editor's Introduction," *Occupy* (Brooklyn: Zucotti Park Press, 2012), 9.

44. W. J. T. Mitchell, "Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Autumn 2012): 10–12.

45. Hardesty, "I Would Prefer Not To."

46. Martyris, "A Patron Saint for Occupy."

47. Mary Hesse, "Aristotle's Logic of Analogy," *Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (October 1965): 331.

48. The analogy that draws professional readers into conjunction with *Bartleby* has become more vexed in light of a flurry of reports and studies predicting the decline of the humanities. Amid claims that enrollments in English courses are declining while the interest in and, perhaps more importantly, funding for STEM fields is steadily increasing, do literary critics and literary historians find themselves in the position of Melville's scrivener by insisting on the methodological relevance of humanities interpretation and the public importance of reading? As one of the anonymous readers for this essay asked, "Are we not occupying a space of negation as well?" This is a helpful question—and an unsettling one, too! At a moment when the humanities seem pressed to articulate both its value and viability in economic terms, the significance of reading and interpretation are heightened. Should professors and students mount a defense of reading and interpretation by pointing out all the pluses of the humanities? Such an argument can readily be expressed in ways that would be sure to appeal to the lawyer's concerns for industriousness and productivity. Or, would it be best to prefer not to offer such justifications, which, by the logic of Occupy, only confirm the endangered status of the humanities and legitimize its vulnerability? It is important, after all, to reflect on the positions we occupy, either by choice or force, within such debates.