



“Luigj Gurakuqi”
University of Shkodra
Faculty of Foreign Languages
English Department

The Power of Language

Book of Proceedings
3rd International Conference
22-23 November 2019



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Shkodër, 2021

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MEANINGLESS WORK WITH WORDS: THE PLIGHT OF THE LITERARY SCRIBE

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Abstract

This paper argues that literary scribes constitute a fertile ground for understanding (post)modern transformations concerning the relationship between sign and referent.

Scribes are not supposed to be concerned with the signified, but merely with the transposition of the signifier as signifier from one medium to the other - a mechanical work that, by decoupling the signifier from its signified, turns meaningful words into meaningless objects for the sake of profit generation. Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) and Amy Rowland's *The Transcriptionist* (2014) are two narratives about scribes that implicitly discuss the mechanisms of decoupling the linguistic sign from its referent and speculate about the repercussions. The scrivener and the transcriptionist, the one at the beginning and the other at the erstwhile end of industrial capitalism, thus enter into the discourse about an economic system that shows its ultimately inhuman foundations in its treatment of its human collaborators, who first have to adapt to machine-logic and then, when machine-logic is all-pervasive, are being replaced by machines altogether. Moreover, the scribes seem to warn us that the "liquidation of all referentials" (Baudrillard) threatens to deprive human beings of meaningful, intersubjective language. Yet, as human beings are each the *zoon logon echon*, an animal that has language, this threat to language could amount to an existential threat to humanity itself.

*Keywords: (Post)modernity, Sign and Referent,
Office Novel, Bartleby, Amy Rowland The Transcriptionist*

Scribes, scriveners, copyists, transcriptionists or whatever else one may call the people who, by profession, transfer linguistic signs from one medium to the other, only rarely command literary attention. Nevertheless, one of the most famous and enigmatic American short stories is dedicated to

a scrivener. The author, Herman Melville, seems compelled to begin his story with a justification: the narrator of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) claims that "law-copyists or scriveners" are "an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing [...] has ever been written" (Melville 635). Of course, in accordance with the customs of the 21st century, we have to add that this "interesting and somewhat singular set" is not restricted to men anymore, as Amy Rowland's novel *The Transcriptionist* (2014) confirms. However, it still holds true that so far only little has been written about this professional group. This fact is surprising because scribes constitute a potent symbol of a key aspect of today's human condition. The literary scribes reveal the negative consequences of decoupling signifiers from their signified for the sake of mass production. The nature of their work thus especially epitomizes and questions not only modern and postmodern phenomena connected with language, but also phenomena related to the vanishing private/public divide, the focus on the present in a whirligig society and technological change.

This essay uses Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and Rowland's *The Transcriptionist* to demonstrate the symbolic quality of literary scribes. While Melville heralds the transformations of modernity at the beginning of industrial capitalism, Rowland's transcriptionist, Lena Respass, and her alter ego, Arlene Lebow - a court reporter representing another kind of scribe - grapple with the realities, or rather the "simulations" of today's highly developed industrial societies (see Baudrillard). The postmodern transcriptionist thus becomes a kind of (modern) "sister" of Bartleby, to use a Deleuzian expression (Deleuze 88). While it may seem inappropriate to generalize from only two fictional texts, my repudiation of the dominant practice of backing assessments

first and foremost with quantitative evidence constitutes an attempt to echo the literary scribe's subversive efforts to question conventional normative principles in society.

Literary and real-world scribes have a specific way of handling language. Efficient scribes do not heed the meaning of what they write. Words are to be treated as mere signs to be transferred; and only the formal side of the sign is of importance. Any mental deviation from the linguistic surface to the represented object, issue or idea would cost time. By dismissing the referent, the signifier becomes its own signified. The decoupling of the signifier from the signified is thus a distinctive feature of the scribe's work, which can be summed up as meaningless work with meaningful words.

Such a "liquidation of referentials" with all its consequences is, according to Jean Baudrillard, a characteristic phenomenon of late capitalism and its logic of equivalences:

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials - worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra (Baudrillard 2).

The dismissal of the referent means that human language is stripped of its semantic basis. In his article "Meaning" (1957), Paul Grice contrasted semantic meaning as "timeless meaning" with the pragmatic meaning of a "particular occasion" (Grice 217, *passim*). If the time-and space-transcending quality of the semantic code is threatened

by “a liquidation of all referentials” (Baudrillard 2), the referentlessness of the linguistic sign has repercussions for intersubjective communication and social bonding.

When *Bartleby* appears at the lawyer’s office in Melville’s short story, he introduces something unprecedented - the work ethic of industrial capitalism:

At first Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically (Melville 642).

As many critics (e.g. Benack, Deleuze, Foley, Guillen, Kuebrich) before have argued, Melville’s story reflects a sense of anxiety about the impending changes which rapidly expanding trade and industrialization bring about. *Bartleby* heralds new times where, so it seems, quantity is everything, where mass production appears to be insatiable (“as if famishing” and “gorging”) and basic human needs like “pauses” and “digestion” are thought of as disturbances, which need to be purged. Mechanical copying, meant to accelerate the writing process, should be done without “digesting” the contents of the written word. However, the price of this ‘ideal’ world of industrial production also shines through: no signs of human affect, no liveliness, no bonding with fellow human beings, only pale silence and, eventually, death by starvation. *Bartleby*, so it seems, does not only herald new times, but also anticipates possible consequences.

Bartleby's own use of language reinforces the effect of referentless language in communication by his famous formula "I'd prefer not to" (Melville 643, *passim*). Deleuze noticed that this formula is itself referentless: the grammatical object to the verb "to prefer" is missing. At first, the "particular" occasions of the lawyer's concrete requests provide an implicit grammatical object: we understand very well that Bartleby does not want to double check copies, nor go to the post office etc. However, the more Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" turns into a general attitude, that is, the more it becomes independent from the specific context and thus is to be understood as "timeless" the less we comprehend and the more enigmatic he becomes. The pragmatic meaning of the particular occasion is no longer sufficient: communication is disrupted.

Bartleby's refusal to provide a semantic object functions like a wall from which every word bounces back. Still, the human need for sense-making makes the lawyer and the reader search for meaning. This search for sense-making is implicitly formulated by Grice's cooperative principle and conversational maxims (33), and more explicitly by Sperber/Wilson's relevance principle (50). Grice maintains that human beings principally trust their interlocutors to be cooperative in a conversation. Therefore, if confronted with a literally inappropriate utterance, they will assume that some sensible non-literal message is conveyed. Sperber and Wilson, on the other hand, maintain that "[e]very act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance" (260). In other words, any utterance is principally believed to be relevant and thus has a meaning, which is constructed from contextual clues such as the verbal and non-verbal stimuli from the speaker and one's own knowledge and previous experiences.

Lacking any clues from *Bartleby*, one has to rely on one's own individual resources. Hence, *Bartleby's* referentless language becomes highly productive. On the one hand, the lawyer wonders incessantly "What had one best do?" (Melville 644). His reactions range from being "turned into a pillar of salt" (Melville 644), via feeling "perplexity" (Melville 646) and "restless curiosity" (Melville 651), to "fraternal melancholy" (Melville 652), which "merge[s] into fear [...] and repulsion" (Melville 653). On the other hand, the vast critical literature on Melville's story itself bears witness to a proliferation of possible meanings.¹ The lack of reliable referentials has a diversifying effect and seems to stimulate production, in this case the production of thoughts, beliefs and arguments, which seems to parallel the general effect of a capitalist mode of production. Yet this interpretive variety may also turn understanding into a matter of individual choice, rather than grasping something intersubjectively *real* that could be anchored to something outside individual reflection and might *really* concern the person with whom one communicates. The lawyer's manifold suggestions for *Bartleby's* future clearly expose the communicative breakdown between him and his "unaccountable scrivener" (Melville 650). His thoughts have been in vain, he could not make sense of *Bartleby's* demeanor as *Bartleby* does not cooperate by providing some intersubjectively valid referent. He only offers his own "*logic of preference*" (Deleuze 73).² Moreover, the lawyer in Melville's story also demonstrates that the search for individual comprehension isolates: he himself

1 See Beverungen/ Dunne and McCall for comprehensive overviews.

2 See also Kuebrich for a more detailed account and further interpretations of the diverging communicative and ideological assumptions between *Bartleby* and the lawyer.

is not understood by his fellow creatures, who either come up with different interpretations (the lawyer's employees, the grub-man) or entirely shirk the effort of comprehending (the landlord, the new tenant, the police). A weakened semantics thus threatens language not only as a means for intersubjective understanding, but also as a tool for social bonding.

If language no longer fulfils its communicative and social functions, and questions merely generate new questions rather than answers, then language almost seems superfluous. To the lawyer's inquiries about why Bartleby stopped copying, he only replies "Do you not see the reason for yourself?" (Melville 656). According to Deleuze, Bartleby "hollows out a zone of indetermination that renders words indistinguishable that creates a vacuum within language" (73); he no longer seems to need a common language. Consequently, communication breaks down, but manipulation may not be far away - another phenomenon criticized in Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*: Bartleby's question not only nullifies a meaningful communicative exchange, but also implies that the fault lies in the individual other, negating any collective responsibility for the common language. The resulting "perplexity" leaves the lawyer unable to (re)act. He has no means of protection against the power of Bartleby's referentless language.

The scrivener Bartleby may be read - as indeed many critics have done (e.g. Knighton, Kuebrich, Reed, Žižek) - as a herald of modern times. He seems to embody capitalist ideology and live through the corollaries of the mode of capitalist production. Bartleby works mechanically and silently with language. By negating the communicative quality of language, human beings seem to be doomed, because - according to classical Greek thought - humans are the *zoon logon echon*, that is, the animal that has language. If language

no longer fulfils its cognitive and social functions, it ceases to be the defining trait of the human species. It is not coincidental that Bartleby is depicted as “a ghost-like appearance, oddly devoid of life” (Benack 33). Bartleby seems to suggest that the logical consequence of refusing to “digest” meaning is fasting; but that leads to death by starvation, not to human life.

150 years later, Amy Rowland provides Bartleby with a “sister, with whom he [might] consume the ginger nut, the new host” (Deleuze 88). The protagonist of *The Transcriptionist*, Lena Respass, still writes on “silently, palely, mechanically” (Melville 642) instead of consciously putting down signifying propositions. She works for a major newspaper in New York, the *Record*, and leads a solitary, routine life which is dominated by her work in a secluded and somber recording room. Hooked to a Dictaphone, she transcribes audio-taped reports for the *Record's* journalists. Her routine is disrupted when she comes across a report about a blind woman who committed a distinctive kind of suicide: the woman, Arlene Lebow, let herself be mauled by zoo lions. Lena remembers a mysterious chance encounter with this woman, with whom she felt a peculiar connection. Asking herself “what will happen if the woman’s body is not claimed” (Rowland 8), she decides to learn more about her. In the process, Arlene becomes Lena’s alter ego, most obviously when she acknowledges that “we’re both transcriptionists” (Rowland 108). Her quest to retrieve the referent behind the news report about the blind woman gradually frees the transcriptionist from her passive forlornness in the recording room. The overt sign of her regained freedom is a subversive act: when a journalist, by order of the Pentagon, demands that she destroy a previously transmitted report about the Middle East, Lena forwards the transcript for publication and thus stands up for independent journalism.

Compared to Bartleby's copying of written signs, the transcriptionist's task of transferring audio-recorded texts to paper entails stronger physical and mental engagement. Not only eyes and hands are needed, but also ears and her entire body. Lena Respass has to offer herself as a "human conduit." On the way from "her ears through her veins" to her "fast-moving fingertips" (Rowland 4), words and phrases tend to get stuck in the mind. According to Sperber and Wilson, the human voice is given relevance by default and thus will always be processed to a certain degree. Likewise, empirical studies about real transcriptionists have shown that the exposure to vast amounts of spoken information, especially if it is about other people's misfortunes, stays with the workers and leads to traumatizing effects (Wilkes et al; Kiyimba and O'Reilly). Hence, a transcriptionist experiences the required referentless treatment of language as strongly damaging and thus inhuman. In addition, this psychological effect echoes the general perception that the capitalist system increasingly invades the private and the personal (Arendt, Berardi, Pham, Zuboff). While Bartleby lived in the office in a spatial merger, representing the beginnings of a vanishing public/private divide, the postmodern transcriptionist is described as enduring a merger in her mind: "She awakens in the morning with someone else's words, someone else's thoughts, ribboning around her brain. And while she is transcribing, she recites, without realizing, things she has learned from transcribing stories and interviews, mixed in with the flotsam of dreams until she does not know anymore what is real and what is *Record*" (Rowland 8).

In times when economics involves the "exploitation [of] the mind, language, and emotions in order to generate value" (Berardi, see also Zuboff), life itself threatens to become a

simulation, as is symbolized by the transcriptionist's story. Only after she stops treating meaningful words as if they were meaningless can Lena become aware of the exhaustion resulting from her "secondhand life" (Rowland 245). The newspaper setting of *The Transcriptionist* is far from incidental. According to Baudrillard, the mass media in particular are responsible for the obliteration of the real and the pervasiveness of simulated realities.

The mass media produce a world of simulacra which creep into people's minds. Being a newspaper transcriptionist merely exemplifies the phenomenon of institutionalized simulation. To be a transcriptionist at *The Record* means to be rarely mentioned except in the company's manual, where it is noted that "[t]he errors of copyists are the least excusable" (Rowland 4). If that is so, then formal errors of transmission are considered to be of more consequence than errors of content; that is, representation has priority over reality. The dominance of represented fact over real fact is manifest. Institutionalized simulation can also be inferred from the *Record's* communicative style: "Someone asks Howard about his father. The query is perfectly scripted, just like Lena learned in a mandatory development workshop. You are always to have two thirty-second dialogues prepared (one social, one professional) in case you are in the elevator with 'senior management'" (Rowland 65).

But not only the focus on the formal aspects of language, such as the mechanical work of transcriptionists or the scripted communication between staff members threatens the meaningfulness of language and thus its power for communication and social bonding. Quantity and speed add their share to this development.

While Melville's lawyer in the mid-19th century struggled

with the search for meaning under the conditions of a scarcity of information, the excess of information in postmodern times does not seem to improve the situation. The “massive amount of information and the continual cycle of commentary” in the name of sales and profits “has blunted all meaning” (Rowland 158). The sheer quantity of news erases meaning because it exceeds ordinary human processing capacities (Toffler, Wurman, Campbell et al.) and consequently tends to render the overburdened individuals passive and susceptible to manipulation (Briant and Sennett). People seem to need help from experts, who “sort it out for” them and prepare information “bite-size, ingestible, digestible” (Rowland 158); or, at least, they seem to believe they do.

The newspaper slogan “tomorrow, [this] will be yesterday’s news” (Rowland 68) epitomizes another facet of the “liquidation of all referentials” (Baudrillard 2), which again ties in with the specifics of a scribe’s work: the dominance of the present. Neither newspaper readers nor scribes copying texts are supposed to look back but rather to live in the moment. Efficient scribes, trained to write speedily, ideally focus on the immediate present in the shape of the immediate signifier to be transferred for its own sake. Heeding the context and looking back or forward in the text only becomes permissible if there is a need to understand or - as is the case with Melville’s scrivener - to check the quality of the copy (which prompts Bartleby’s first utterance of his famous formula “I would prefer not to,” Melville 643, *passim*). According to cognitive linguists, understanding and qualitative judgements are fundamentally linked to context, including context’s temporal aspect (Croft and Cruse; Langacker). Not only does language proceed in time, but the meanings of single words also derive from the accumulated meanings of previous usages, able

to trigger a complex network of associations. Hence, the efficient scribe who concentrates on the present moment of transferring more or less isolated signifiers becomes a fitting symbol of a society that tends to accept failing coherence in the face of “isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers” (Jameson 10). A whirligig life tends to be lived in an “eternal present” (ibid), which cannot be understood and, consequently, cannot be controlled.

Besides, the steady need for fresh news that causes the aforementioned excess of information renders content itself secondary and arbitrary. The boundaries between the essential and the superficial become hazy; the meaningful and the meaningless become indistinguishable. The transcriptionist feels the impact more immediately than, for instance, the reader of the edited newspaper who can choose which sections to read. In her recording room, a tape about some sport event may follow a report about a natural catastrophe, and society gossip has to be typed as urgently as a dictation about a military operation. The common denominator of all those different texts is their newsworthiness, defined by the expected sales of the newspaper, so that quantity erases qualitative difference.

According to Baudrillard, such an erasure of qualitative difference equals an “implosion of meaning” which “is where simulation begins” (Baudrillard 31, original highlighting). When referents are annihilated and the real is merely simulated, the discriminating gaps between signifier and signified, “beginning and end” (cf. the “*cycle of commentary*” Rowland 158, highlighting mine), and between original and duplicate (see Weinstock on “Bartleby”), seem to disappear into something like Deleuze’s “zone of indistinction, of indiscernibility” (78). Moreover, a peculiar paradox arises

if one tries to account for agency, expressly with *Bartleby* and the lawyer: is *Bartleby*, or the lawyer active or passive, neither or both? While *Bartleby* is mainly linked to qualifiers denoting passivity (“the poor, pale, passive mortal” or “such a helpless creature,” Melville 664) and the lawyer is described as actively searching for solutions, the latter rather tends to react to the former’s apparent passive resistance. Baudrillard’s “indifferentiation of the active and the passive” (Baudrillard 31, original highlighting) is thus reflected in the lawyer’s inability to affect *Bartleby*, and in *Bartleby*’s ability to render the lawyer’s efforts futile and to “unman” him (Melville 650). This illustrates Deleuze’s “extreme proximity, an absolute contiguity [...] but an unnatural alliance” (78) and Baudrillard’s “gap that vanishes in the process” (31).

In contrast to her 19th-century predecessor, the transcriptionist’s alter ego, the blind court reporter Arlene Lebow, is not content to stubbornly act out the consequences of a simulated, referentless modern world and thus warn against it. She attempts to come to terms with her scrivener’s plight by retrieving meaning from unification with nature:

This is my last entry. I am through with this body. It is my choice. I want to inhabit the lion’s body. It is not that I think I will become the lion. I am not crazy. I don’t want to disappear, to fade. But I wish to be devoured, devoured by something that does not speak. Not in our language anyway. Maybe we are as we move through the world. If I cannot inhabit the lion’s body, then at least I can be a small part of him as he moves through the world. I hope that for a moment as he devours my body the lion will be satisfied, that it will remind him of his wildness of spirit, that it will remind him that he is a lion (Rowland 167).

Nature is typically constructed as ontological reality because it appears to be independent of the human signifying system. Accordingly, Arlene focuses on the bodily aspect, the referent, and believes in an ontological truth that is unvarnished by the (necessarily falsifying?) human representation of a linguistic sign. The problem, however, is that nature has almost disappeared, especially in urban environments such as New York where it has become “shocking to see” a falcon mauling a pigeon, that is, “to see nature assert itself in the middle of Manhattan” (Rowland 113). In a world of simulacra, nature has ceased to be an ontological reality but is merely the signifier of a vanished referent. The lions which kill the blind woman are not wild lions. They are unable to assimilate the momentary encounter with their predatory instinct and get “very upset” and “unsettled” (Rowland 125) afterwards. Arlene’s desire to reunite with nature is therefore doomed: not only does she lose her life like *Bartleby*, but, on the way to the morgue, her remains go missing, too. Referents without formal representation are not existent for the human mind as it needs its representative faculties.

Lena Respass succumbs neither to meaninglessness produced by empty signifiers, nor to a misleading nostalgia for the power of nature as a signified that needs no signification. She attempts to actively re-unite the sign with its referent and, so it seems, wants to get to the roots of simulation. By searching for both Arlene’s real body and her linguistically represented past, Lena furnishes an actual referent for the otherwise merely newsworthy report. She manages to secure a real signified for the signifier. Yet she does not stop here: by transmitting a banned report, she ensures that events happening in the real world are not edited out of news coverage and thus out of the public perception of the world.

Lena's subversive act wants to (re)connect the media, and thus the entire socio-political system, with the real, with truth, and thus with the democratic ideals of journalism as "the fourth estate," "the check on all the branches of government" and "the guardians of the guardians" (Rowland 143). While the *Record's* publisher refers to these journalistic ideals in a pep talk as mere quotations, Lena insists on their referentiality. They serve her as a guideline to overcome passivity and become active instead. By re-uniting rhetoric with deed, she returns referents to the signifier and thus meaning to the words. She seems to suggest that a re-engagement with reality could and should be revived. Thus, the narrative voice obviously does not share Baudrillard's pessimism about a necessarily vanishing reality but insists that it may and should be retrieved.

Attention to the body is all the more pressing in so far as the body seems in the process of being banned from the public sphere of work. There are no law copyists anymore as in Melville's short story, and the fictional transcriptionist of Rowland's novel is said to be the last of her kind. Technological change, as reflected in the literary representations of these scribes, adds a further urgency to the question of human agency in a world like that of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*: Bartleby's working like a machine and the transcriptionist's working with a machine echo a development which generates the widespread contemporary anxiety about being *replaced* by a machine altogether. The suggestion that the human may disappear from the workplace, while the inhuman characteristics of that work not only remain but are assimilated into the whole of society, is indeed uncanny. However optimistically Rowland's *The Transcriptionist* ends, one does not know whether Lena's individual victory over the growing "zone of indetermination" (Deleuze 73) constitutes a

generalizable remedy. It is the American dream that it will be so, but whether the dream can come true or will turn into the nightmare of complete simulation, one cannot say. After all, as a temporary lover of Lena observes, “[s]he is believed to be the last newspaper transcriptionist in America stop” (Rowland 179).

What we can say, however, is that Melville’s judgment that scribes are “an interesting and somewhat singular set” (Melville 635) still seems sound. Thanks to the specific demands of their work, especially in view of the way they have to work with language, authors are able to address and explore modern and postmodern cultural, socio-political, economic and technological phenomena. The perspectives of the three scribes discussed here and their reactions to their specific contexts differ, but they all are affected by or concerned with a comparable dilemma: the question of meaning when fundamental intersubjective criteria become annihilated, where means and ends implode, and where nothing but growth and quantity seems to count. The human world must not be reduced to a mere sign system of quantitative equivalences; nor, however, must trust be given entirely to the bodily world as supposedly pure and truly ontological. Humans are the *zoon logon echon*, who have to use language for making sense of the world and communicate with one another. Therefore, both the signified and the signifier are needed, including the stabilizing intersubjective quality of “timeless” meaning, so that humanity can *really* exist, treasuring its language, and so that meaningful words are no longer abused for meaningless work.

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