

## 12. A Connexionist Bartleby?

### A Melvillean Reading of Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999/2005)

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#### **"I would prefer not to."**

In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007/08, the protagonist of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wallstreet" (1853) became an icon of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Even at the time, commentators pointed out that this made a lot of sense given that Bartleby's story is about his occupation of a lawyer's office located somewhere on Wall Street. Despite the lawyer's best efforts at removing Bartleby, a copyist who (for mysterious reasons) stops reading and writing and hence becomes unemployable, Bartleby does not budge, but continues to inhabit the lawyer's premises until the latter is forced to move. (Bartleby's "cadaverously gentlemanly *nonchalance*" proves bad for business.)<sup>1</sup> By choosing Bartleby as their "patron saint," Occupy Wall Street imagined a genealogy of Wall Street occupations in which Wall Street moves rather than the protestors.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the motif of passive yet physical resistance (refusing to be moved), Bartleby also became an icon of symbolic resistance to the pervasive ideology of capitalism. Bartleby's famous tagline, "I would prefer not to," featured prominently, for example, on a poster that showed the silhouettes of a wheel, with a hamster standing (contemplatively) in front of it. Adopting Bartleby's indirect mode of resistance was not simply a statement of refusal

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- 1 Herman Melville, "Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street," *Melville's Short Novels*, ed. Dan McCall (New York: Norton, [1853] 2002), 16.
  - 2 Nina Martyris, "A Patron Saint for Occupy Wall Street," *The New Republic*, October 15, 2011, <https://newrepublic.com/article/96276/nina-martyris-ows-and-bartleby-the-scrivener>.

to return to everyday capitalist routines and one's place in the system, but it also opened—as it does in Melville's text—a space for criticism that could not be coopted or assimilated. In this sense, *Bartleby* became a model for Occupy Wall Street because he appeared to represent a way of criticizing the status quo that did not contribute to the ideological feedback-loop. His language of preference left nothing for capitalism to coopt or assimilate.

"[S]ay now that in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable:—say so, Bartleby," the lawyer implores. To which Bartleby replies: "At present, I would prefer not to be a little reasonable."<sup>3</sup>

## Making Connections

As a scholar of US literature and culture, I read *The New Spirit of Capitalism* as part of this cultural moment in the late 2000s. While the study was first published in 1999 in France and translated into English in 2005, its significance became apparent most forcefully during the aftermath of the financial crisis and during the formation of what has been called the economic turn or, more recently, the economic humanities. One of the key insights of Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's study is that the contemporary capitalist regime has emerged fortified from the attacks of the '68 movement by incorporating and adapting the social and artistic critique levelled at it. If the bureaucratic capitalism of the sixties in France had been charged with restricting liberty and authenticity, the corporate capitalism of the nineties had not just learned but benefitted from offering employees more self-organized, creative, and fulfilling labor. To stay with Melville, Bartleby's colleagues Nippers and Turkey had finally gotten what they *really* needed: flexible working hours and adjustable standing desks. At a time of economic crisis, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* offered an analysis of how the capitalist regime continued to justify and thereby maintain itself.

As their title suggests, Boltanski and Chiapello's study is indebted to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), and in particular to Weber's thesis that profit-seeking and self-interest are not enough to motivate people to operate within a capitalist system but "that people need

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3 Melville, "Bartleby," 20.

powerful moral reasons for rallying to capitalism” (9).<sup>4</sup> Yet, instead of Weber’s religious framework, Boltanski and Chiapello make use of Albert Hirschman’s secular one: the idea that Enlightenment thought justified profit-seeking “in terms of society’s common good” (9). Combining Weber’s and Hirschman’s insights into what motivates capitalism’s subjects, Boltanski and Chiapello look for contemporary capitalism’s justifications both in terms of individual and general motives—and how these have changed over time. As both Weber and Hirschman suggested, capitalism cannot of itself find reasons for people to participate nor grounds for a moral justification of its system (8–9). It has to find these elsewhere.

While Boltanski and Chiapello’s focus is on the spirit of capitalism that began to emerge during the 1990s, their book also includes an analysis of the second spirit (1930s to 1960s) and some brief references to the first. The first spirit is embodied in the captains of industry and a form of capitalism that is often described as proprietary and which Boltanski and Chiapello characterize as domestic and patrimonial. The sacrifices that were made to afford the rise of large industrial corporations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were justified by a “vulgar utilitarianism,” they write: “a belief in progress, the future, science, technology, and the benefits of industry” (17). The crisis of legitimation from which the second spirit emerges is inaugurated by the stock market crash of 1929. No longer owned and controlled by a single individual or family, the company itself becomes the narrative center of this new ethos, with the manager as its “heroic” protagonist (18).<sup>5</sup> The impersonal, bureaucratic organization emerges as a model for “social justice” in the management discourse of this period because it appears to operate on

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4 All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005).

5 Boltanski and Chiapello write that this is also the period “of the birth of management literature” (59). While Boltanski and Chiapello consistently foreground the role of economic crises (such as in 1929) and “the emergence of the new social body of salaried managers and administrators” (59), I would argue that the fundamental shift in operative power plays a much more important role in this period, that is, the separation of ownership and control in corporations that takes place during the first decades of the twentieth century. This legal development entails a fundamental shift in the nature of corporate property and to no little extent contributes to the rise of corporate storytelling. See, for example, Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1998] 2001).

objective and rational criteria: “The new system will be more just, and hence more conducive to everyone’s benefit, because people in firms will be assessed according to objective criteria, and there will be an end to nepotism, favours, ‘string-pulling,’ ‘the grapevine.’ As for society as a whole, the ‘rational management’ proposed here, by making firms more efficient, serves economic and social progress, the two terms not being dissociated at the time” (86). In this way, the second spirit of capitalism gives meaning to the work of the French *cadres* (the management elites) until May 1968, when the social and artistic critique leveled against it requires a fundamental reorganization of corporate and ideological structures.

This is one of Boltanski and Chiapello’s central tenets: that capitalism has a “surprising capacity for survival by absorbing part of the critique” directed against it (27). Critique thus works as a “motor in changes in the spirit of capitalism,” which means that criticizing capitalism runs the danger of contributing to a feedback-loop (27). The key aspects of the artistic and the social critique levelled against capitalism in 1968 consisted in charges that “capitalism [is] a source of *disenchantment* and *inauthenticity*,” and that it is “opposed to the freedom, autonomy and creativity of ... human beings” (37). Looking at the management literature of the 1990s, Boltanski and Chiapello find evidence that the third spirit of capitalism has successfully acculturated this critique. How else to explain, they ask, the rejection of hierarchical organization, the endorsement of flexible and creative work (or rather, “projects”), and the high priority of personal self-fulfillment in work? The protagonist of this narrative is the project manager, who has learned to live in networks, collaborating and connecting with colleagues, clients, and experts. The name that Boltanski and Chiapello give this logic of capitalism is “connexionist” (136).

While many scholars in 2008 and after may have turned to *The New Spirit of Capitalism* to better understand capitalism’s “surprising capacity for survival,” part of the book’s relevance may stem from the fact that it is not *radically* new. In particular, the study’s reference to Max Weber’s work provides a familiar angle on capitalism. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber discusses US American life writing and advice literature, such as Benjamin Franklin’s “Necessary Hints to those that Would Be Rich.” In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski and Chiapello analyze management literature from the 1960s and 1990s, which they understand as the modern version of those earlier “works of advice and edification concerning the conduct of business (or the family economy)” (59). Overall, therefore, their book is making connections to texts that—for a long time—formed part of the canon of American Studies.

Moreover, what Boltanski and Chiapello describe as a new spirit of capitalism seemed to some like old news. After all, whereas corporate capitalism of the “connexionist” kind may have been new to France in the 1990s, in the United States it had been in the making for much longer. As one reviewer puts it, “one-third of the book is devoted to a portrait of a new capitalism that, for Americans, is hardly new. We have had our fill of baloney about project-oriented and communal workplaces, ‘the creative class,’ flexible production, so-called lifetime learning, [and so forth].”<sup>6</sup> Yet, nonetheless, a study of the kind that Boltanski and Chiapello provided for the French case was still missing for the US at the time

Because it is in a sense both new and old, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* ultimately confronts us with the question of what is new (or old) about the economic humanities that took shape in the years after the financial crisis. In itself, the combined study of literature and economics is hardly new either. As recently as the 1990s, scholars in literary and cultural studies engaged in what Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen called in a collection of the same name “New Economic Criticism.” Scholarship that contributed to this approach included works such as Walter Benn Michaels’s *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987) and Marc Shell’s *Money, Language, and Thought* (1982). In a recent article for *American Literary History*, Paul Crosthwaite, Peter Knight, and Nicky Marsh have argued that, while these works have become associated largely with a focus on the homology between language and money, the “Economic Humanities” were much more heterogeneous and ultimately prescient. However, it is the “label,” they argue, the conjunctive nature of “literature and economics,” that has proven constraining.<sup>7</sup>

### “I like to be stationary.”

Approaching the question of what kind of research and what goals the Economic Humanities should pursue, Crosthwaite, Knight, and Marsh urge us

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6 Wallace Katz, “Democracy and the New Capitalism,” review of *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, trans. Gregory Elliott, *New Labor Forum* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 126–130, here 126.

7 Paul Crosthwaite, Peter Knight, and Nicky Marsh, “The Economic Humanities and the History of Financial Advice,” *American Literary History* 31, no. 4 (2019): 661–686, here 664.

not to leave the field of economics to “the self-designated experts.”<sup>8</sup> The humanities are “needed,” they maintain, “to remedy the technocratic ‘tunnel vision’ that had contributed so evidently to the financial crisis.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the major challenge of the Economic Humanities is to “demystify” and denaturalize “the categories of economic knowledge” by historicizing them: “to consider the narratives, tropes, and foundational metaphors—as well as the institutional contexts and representational technologies—that have made particular modes of economic knowledge and discourse dominant in different historical moments.”<sup>10</sup> Importantly, this project is not about narrowly “dissecting ... technical assumptions,” but about studying “the broader historical imaginary through an anatomy of the necessary fictions underpinning economics.”<sup>11</sup>

What are “the narratives, tropes, and foundational metaphors” that afford and shape economic knowledge? Perhaps *Bartleby* can help us out here. From the perspective of the new spirit of capitalism, *Bartleby* is obviously the epitome of the wage-laborer who has *not* “learn[ed] to live ‘in a network’” (85). Boltanski and Chiapello describe the ideal habitus constructed by management literature as one that is embodied in “*creative beings*” who are “proficient at numerous tasks, constantly educating themselves, adaptable, with a capacity for self-organization and working with very different people” (76). *Bartleby*, of course, is none of these. What is more, *Bartleby* does not let himself be mobilized—neither literally nor figuratively. Mobilization, Boltanski and Chiapello explain, is the preferred term for motivation in management discourse in the 1990s, because it suggests movement without a mover. While “‘motivation’ ... connotes a form of control they endeavour to reject, [managers] prefer ‘mobilization,’ which refers to an attempt at motivation supposedly devoid of any manipulation” (80). Nobody needs to motivate the perfect laborer, they are intrinsically mobilized. But *Bartleby* refuses any form of mobility, resisting both the lawyer’s attempts to get him to vacate the premises and his attempts to find *Bartleby* a new job. “I like to be stationary,” *Bartleby* tells his confounded employer. “But I’m not particular.”<sup>12</sup>

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8 Crosthwaite, Knight, and Marsh, “The Economic Humanities,” 664.

9 Crosthwaite, Knight, and Marsh, 665.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 Melville, “*Bartleby*,” 30.

Taking a more historical approach, we could say that “Bartleby the Scrivener” can provide us with a literary example of the industrialist-capitalist habitus, which Boltanski and Chiapello describe as characteristic of the first spirit of capitalism. The lawyer’s office and his management practices are exemplary in this way for “the essentially familiar forms of capitalism,” for “patrimony,” “hierarchy,” and “domestic” arrangements (19). But that is not what should interest us here. What is more important is that Melville’s text gives us access to some controlling metaphors of the industrialist-capitalist imagination, such as, for example, the metaphor of the wall. As many scholars, most famously Leo Marx, have pointed out, the story is about Bartleby’s confinement and isolation: walls, screens, closed doors, and eventually a prison yard keep Bartleby confined and separated from his fellow human beings. These spatial metaphors build on the association between Wall Street and capitalism that was already established by the time of Melville’s writing, but they go beyond metonymy. They revolve around the pivotal role of property in the antebellum economy, suggesting all kinds of containers and enclosures. In other words, they evoke a world that is (in this respect) precisely defined by stationariness and confinement.

## A Connexionist Bartleby?

As critics and reviewers have suggested over the years, the value of *The New Spirit of Capitalism* rests in how it provides us with a better understanding of the development of the institutional contexts of three distinct spirits of capitalism, each the result of capitalism’s ability to incorporate non-economic motives and each expressing its own logic of justification. But I want to suggest that the book’s significance for the twenty-first century—its value as a key-work—derives from an aspect of Boltanski and Chiapello’s study that is rarely if noticed or commented on<sup>13</sup>: its observations on the role of the imag-

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13 And if critics do, they usually do so negatively: “Another possible strategy for losing weight might be to ditch the textual materials that form the basis of a ‘corpus’ of work from the 1960s and from the 1990s.” Martin Parker, “The Seventh City,” review of *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *Organization* 15, no. 4 (2008): 610–614, here 611.

ination in the transformations described, and, following from this, how it draws our attention to the “traveling” forms of corporate storytelling.<sup>14</sup>

At first sight, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* is not a work that invites interdisciplinary research with the humanities, at least not when we consider its assessment of “artistic critique.” Boltanski and Chiapello argue that, while the social critique of capitalism (i.e., demands for solidarity, equality, and most of all security) lost momentum and influence in the seventies and eighties on account of political changes, the artistic critique, which demanded liberation, autonomy, and authenticity, was incorporated into capitalist discourses themselves. This happened, first, by way of a commodification of authenticity (primarily by offering goods that had hitherto been excluded from the commodity sphere), and, second, by way of philosophy’s and sociology’s discrediting of the very notion of authenticity and hence the subject (445). Boltanski and Chiapello refer to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze to illustrate the latter argument, and it is clear that this second critique weighs much heavier in their eyes because, they contend, it leaves no position from which to criticize capitalism. In the same vein, they suggest that it has been the work of philosophy and sociology (Deleuze, Latour, Calton) in the seventies that has helped to detach the concept of the network from its earlier (criminal) associations and redefine it in the language of liberation (145–146).

My point here is not to discuss the validity of their argument since that has already been done: The idea of the artistic critique’s complicity has been challenged by Maurizio Lazzarato, among others, and it has been revisited in more nuanced ways by recent analysts of creativity and authenticity, such as Andreas Reckwitz.<sup>15</sup> But despite their critical, at times negative, perspective on some theoretical frameworks of twentieth-century cultural studies, Boltanski and Chiapello nonetheless provide the outline of a cultural studies analysis. It is in the context of their discussion of the genre of management literature that they refer to “the connexionist imagination” and its wider significance beyond this corpus of texts.

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14 For the idea of forms as traveling, see Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

15 Maurizio Lazzarato, “The Misfortunes of the ‘Artistic Critique’ and of Cultural Employment,” trans. Mary O’Neill, *Transversal*, January 2007, <https://transversal.at/transversal/0207/lazzarato/en>; Andreas Reckwitz, *The Invention of Creativity: Modern Society and the Culture of the New*, trans. Steven Black (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

*The New Spirit of Capitalism* is based on a qualitative and quantitative analysis of French management literature from the 1960s through the 1990s; metaphors and tropes play a central role in these texts. While the comparatively small number of selected documents has been criticized, Boltanski and Chiapello describe management literature as a coherent genre that is related to the “edifying books or manuals of moral instruction” (58) studied by Max Weber as accompanying the rise of the managerial class since the beginning of the twentieth century. As a genre, management literature is characterized by its “prescriptive,” normative style (58)—“[the books’] aim is to state what should be, not what is” (59)—as well as by its occasionally “lyrical, even heroic style” (59). Somewhat apologetically, they twice admit “that realism is not a major feature of the texts studied” (59, 58). What is a major feature instead is intertextuality, and in particular, intertextual references to the metaphor of the network in writings from the humanities and natural sciences. “This is how the forms of capitalist production accede to representation in each epoch, by mobilizing concepts and tools that were initially developed largely autonomously in the theoretical sphere or domain of basic scientific research” (104). Moreover, this incorporation of non-economic usages of the network-metaphor is not unidirectional. Instead, the network-metaphor proves to be a traveling concept, a form that—as they note with some reservation—“is gradually taking on the task of a new general representation of societies” (138).

Ultimately, Boltanski and Chiapello suggest that their findings about management literature and the changes in corporate culture illustrate a larger socio-cultural transformation at the end of the twentieth century. As such, what they have described is not limited to this corpus of texts or to companies’ internal communications, but shapes culture at large. Boltanski and Chiapello call this “the connexionist imagination” (140): “As disclosed by novelistic, cinematic or TV fiction, an investment of the imagination by the social in the shape of dramas, tensions, complexes or dilemmas associated with the question of class and social origins ... thus tends to be replaced today by a focus on the question of bonds, which are grasped as invariably problematic, fragile, to be created or re-created” (138).

This is a claim that is grand and narrow at the same time. Yet it nonetheless suggests the contours of an interdisciplinary research agenda for the twenty-first century. This is not to say, of course, that there is no cultural studies scholarship available on networks: Jonathan Grossman’s *Charles Dickens’s Networks* (2012) and Wesley Beal’s *Networks of Modernism: Reorganizing American*

*Narrative* (2015) come to mind, as well as the special issue of *Amerikastudien/ American Studies, Network Theory and American Studies* (2012), edited by Ulfried Reicherdt und Regina Schober. But I want to briefly suggest a different direction of research, one in which Boltanski and Chiapello already take the first steps.

Using Boltanski and Chiapello's observations on the genre of management literature as a starting point, such research could focus on the varieties of corporate storytelling in US culture. Corporate storytelling is a term that refers to the managerial narratives that companies use to provide their employees not just with motivation and inspiration, but more practically with the rules and norms that should guide their decisions when working for the company (corporate philosophies, memos, etc.). But it is also increasingly used for external communications with customers and partners to contribute to the brand value, such as in mission statements, advertisements, and so forth. Moreover, various forms of life writing, such as the autobiographies of founders or CEOs, have become an important genre for both internal and external communications, as have TED talks. But corporate storytelling, in my definition here, is not limited to this (largely) factual variety of memos and autobiographies. It also includes a growing body of fictional narratives that practice and explore corporate storytelling as expression of the connexionist imagination, such as Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End* (2007), Jennifer Egan's *Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), or, more recently, Elvia Wilk's *Oval: A Novel* (2019). Such works go far beyond a preoccupation with "bonds" and relationships, as Boltanski and Chiapello suggest, and significantly add to our understanding—in the spirit of Economic Humanities—of how aesthetic and social forms interact and afford "particular modes of economic knowledge."<sup>16</sup>

### **"Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!"**

One question remains to be answered, however: the question of the goal of Economic Humanities in the face of capitalism's ability to incorporate critique. "I would prefer not to," says Bartleby, but should this be the critic's tagline too? Recently, Rita Felski and Elizabeth Anker have called this type of "self-questioning" a "generic feature of critique": a habit that comes with the

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16 Crosthwaite, Knight, and Marsh, "The Economic Humanities," 665.

project.<sup>17</sup> Yet as an analytical disposition, it seems more than appropriate at the beginning of an interdisciplinary endeavor if we consider, as Crosthwaite, Knight, and Marsh do, that “[t]o be taken seriously by those within economics, finance, and business studies, the Economic Humanities will need to become intimately familiar with research in those disciplines.”<sup>18</sup> Faced with such a task, Michelle Chihara and Matt Seybold have recently wondered about the danger of complicity: “But, by spending so many hours engaging with what might be compellingly be characterized as capitalist apoloia, mustn’t we also ask: Are we complicit, just as economists are, in rationalizing and normalizing an unsound and exploitative ideology?”<sup>19</sup>

The Economic Humanities are not the first interdisciplinary project in the Humanities that grapples with the task of defining its relationship to another discipline, of course. Crosthwaite, Knight, and Marsh have looked to the Environmental Humanities for a model, and they have specifically highlighted how “our understanding of both the environment and the economy—and our ability to avert catastrophe—will be greatly improved if we resist regarding these as narrowly technological fields best left to the self-designated experts.”<sup>20</sup> While I agree that the Environmental Humanities provide a positive example (even though the relationship to science is not untroubled), we can also turn to Law and Literature for a more cautionary tale. As an approach to teaching in US law schools, Law and Literature sought to counter the growing influence of the Law and Economics school (spearheaded by Ronald Coase and Richard Posner, for example) in the 1970s. The latter stood for the idea that the tools and frameworks of economic theory can be applied to law and make legal practice more consistent, transparent, and ultimately just. In an effort to retain the idea of equity in legal training, Law and Literature sought to provide what seemed to be missing: “Literature could save law from itself by reminding it of its lost humanity, infusing it with the human in order to grant it a new reality.”<sup>21</sup> Even though Law and Literature has since developed into

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17 Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski, “Introduction,” in *Critique and Postcritique*, ed. Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 8.

18 Crosthwaite, Knight, and Marsh, “The Economic Humanities,” 665.

19 Matt Seybold and Michelle Chihara, “Introduction,” in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Economics*, ed. Matt Seybold and Michelle Chihara (New York: Routledge, 2019), 3.

20 Crosthwaite, Knight, and Marsh, “The Economic Humanities,” 664.

21 Julie Stone Peters, “Law, Literature, and the Vanishing Real,” *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (2005): 442–453, here 445. Peters’s argument is much more complex and bidirectional in that

a heterogenous field that is engaged in a debate over critique of its own, it has still not fully come to terms with these questions of interdisciplinarity.<sup>22</sup> This is also the question that Economic Humanities must continue to address, and it will not be an easy one to settle. “Ah Bartleby!”, the lawyer sighs, and we may, too. “Ah humanity!”<sup>23</sup>

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she points out what literary studies hoped to gain from the interdisciplinary project: “At the same time, speaking truth to power, literature could at last do something real!” (445).

22 See Elizabeth Anker and Bernadette Meyler, eds., *New Directions in Law and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

23 Melville, “Bartleby,” 34.