Bartleby's Autism: Wandering along Incommunicability

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BARTLEBY'S AUTISM

WANDERING ALONG INCOMMUNICABILITY

Amit Pinchevski

> *This line whose writing is to be sought is a wandering line. It leads us in the search of this "something else," the elementary object of this manifest begging that emanates from the slightest gesture of any child, and is exacerbated when coming from a maladapted child.*
>
> —*Fernand Deligny,* Nous et l'innocent

Browsing through Web sites dedicated to information about autism, one might come across a list, which is featured on a number of sites, of famous people with autistic traits. Alongside historical figures such as Albert Einstein, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Glen Gould, there are also names of fictional characters like Sherlock Holmes, Mr. Spock, Mr. Bean, and Herman Melville's Bartleby the scrivener.[1] At first blush, this might seem strange, yet somehow unsurprising, given the extraordinary run of interpretations the figure of Bartleby has had. It is yet another entry on that long list of Marxist, psychoanalytic, existential, and theological commentaries the scrivener has inspired. However, a closer look into the various historical, intellectual, and cultural contexts implied by the juxtaposition of Bartleby and autism reveals a complex network of discourses relating to the problem of human communication—or rather, human communication as a problem.

In the following, I take up Bartleby as a figure upon which literature, science, and philosophy intersect on the question of human communication. In fact, Bartleby can be understood as uniquely inhabiting all three great forms of thought outlined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994): philosophy, art, and science. In the first he constitutes a conceptual figure, in the second an aesthetic figure, and in the third a figure of observation. The scrivener stands at the point of interference,

as it were, amid the sways of these three immense discourse generators. And if, indeed, what defines these three great forms of thought, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is confronting chaos, then the chaos confronted with Bartleby's character is that of incommunicability. Reading Bartleby as autistic therefore interlinks with some key issues currently under debate in critical theory, cultural critique, and philosophy of language and communication.

My purpose, however, is not a sustained reading of Melville's story; in a sense, the contrary. Weaving medical, literary, philosophical, and historical readings, the following is an attempt to account for incommunicability, where autism serves as a container and Bartleby serves as a personification. Yet the subject of incommunicability in terms of lack or excess (and hence as a species of alienation or the sublime, respectively) is not in question here; nor is incommunicability as that which negates communication, nor as that which constitutes its opposite extreme (the word itself already betrays such inclination). Rather, at issue is incommunicability as a mode of potentiality and, as such, as generative of various discourses of communication. What this discussion ultimately calls into question is the production of communication as a social value, attempting to reveal thereby the indeterminate and indeterminable link between communication and sociality.

The ensuing pages constitute an excursion into four topoi (in the double sense of topic and site) where the conjunction of Bartleby and autism is under consideration in terms of disability, expressibility, gender, and community. Each topos occasions unlikely encounters between divergent discourses that come to converge on the scrivener's communicative impairment. Moving along a variety of interpretative trajectories, this nomadic reading is motivated by a theme elaborated on in the last topos—that of a "wandering line" (*ligne d'erre*)—which offers a novel approach for writing about and accounting for the incommunicable. The text as a whole can then be read as tracing the paths leading toward the conceptualization of Bartleby's autism as well as the paths leading away from it, toward alternative conjunctions and correlations—lines of territorialization and deterritorialization, to use Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) terms. Insofar as this reading bears out these two lines—the conceptualizing and the wandering, the territorializing and the deterritorializing—it is in between the lines where incommunicability is to be traced.

FRACTURED INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Bartleby is a literary figure with an exceptional clinical history. Among the various readings of the story, there has been a continuing attempt to diagnose the scrivener's strange affliction. In the 1960s and 1970s the typical diagnosis was schizophrenia, with several commentators resorting to key theories, from Freud to Laing, to account for Bartleby's disorder.[2] However, it seems that nowadays the common diagnosis, as will be discussed below, is autism. Arguably, this transformation is not simply indicative of an etiological discovery, but signals a fundamental shift in social and cultural concerns: if the problem before was intrapersonal, the problem today seems to be interpersonal. To the extent that Bartleby has been a peg on which to hang the current clinical hypotheses, what recent interpretations reflect is a turn toward the normalization of intersubjective communication and the pathologization of its defiance. That communication itself has become a source of concern for clinicians in different fields is a sign of the growing preoccupation with this issue in contemporary culture.

References to Bartleby within the context of autism go back more than three decades. Among the first examples is a psychoanalytic study featuring the case of Barry, a young man who fails to find his way in life and so remains at home with his mother. The analyst concludes that "the possibility that the world might have requirements of him which he should struggle to meet was simply alien to his mind, much like Melville's Bartleby" (Meltzer, 28). In line with the doctrine of the time, autism was regarded as a form of withdrawal instigated by unconscious complications with the maternal object—and the figure of Bartleby was invoked as the epitome of pathological infantility (which, indecently, stems from the Latin *infantem,* not able to speak).

A more detailed account of Bartleby's autism appeared in 1976 in an obscure literary journal, authored by Marshall University professor William P. Sullivan, who was also the father of an autistic boy. The author reads in Bartleby the key elements of autism as described by Leo Kanner, the child psychiatrist who first reported the disorder in 1943: extreme aloneness, difficulty with communication, and preservation of sameness. "Those familiar with infantile autism," writes Sullivan, "should readily recognize that Bartleby is a high-functioning autistic adult" (46). Melville's description of the scrivener as "a victim

of innate and incurable disorder" (Melville, 132) should therefore be taken literally; likewise, the lawyer's despair whenever facing Bartleby is a familiar experience to parents of autistic children. In the eyes of this scholar, who is also a concerned father, Bartleby's ultimate fate is the result of not having someone compassionate and tolerant enough to help him survive. Bartleby is abandoned, and in his depression he stops eating and dies. It was misunderstanding and lack of sympathy that killed Bartleby.

The figure of Bartleby has recently received renewed attention by medical researchers, who now refer to the scrivener as a marker for the Autistic Syndrome Disorder in general, and Asperger's syndrome in particular. A leading child psychiatrist sees in Bartleby an embodiment of the main clinical features of the disorder: "lack of empathy; naiveté, inappropriate discourse; little or no ability to form friends; pedantic, repetitive speech; poor nonverbal communication; intense absorption in certain subjects; and clumsy and ill-coordinated movement and odd postures" (Kestenbaum, 280). The basis for this evaluation is Hans Asperger's early work, which described boys who had intact cognitive and verbal abilities, but exhibited "a severity of social interaction, a failure of communication, and an intense absorption in certain subjects." Melville's depiction of the forlorn scrivener, originally published in 1853, serves as a historical validation to the fact that individuals with these symptoms "have been with us throughout history and probably before" (280).

A full-scale study of the scrivener's clinical condition was undertaken recently by a researcher from Stanford Medical School. Drawing on the latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM IV*), this researcher also argues that Bartleby exhibits the characteristics of an individual with Asperger's syndrome (Koegel, 270–72). Here, too, Melville's story is taken as empirical evidence to support the existence of autism almost a century before it was formally recorded. According to this study, the symptoms Bartleby manifests accurately correspond to the three main categories of autism as specified in the *DSM*. First, Bartleby reveals a marked impairment in social interaction; this is evidenced by descriptions such as "his eyes looked dull and glazed" (Melville, 135), his reply "mildly cadaverous" (134), and his intonation "flutelike" (121). It is argued that such "deliberate

avoidance of social interaction is commonly seen in individuals with ASD" (Koegel, 271). Second, Bartleby displays impairments in communication as manifested by an inability to initiate and sustain a conversation with others. Hence, his repetitive phrase, "I would prefer not to," is taken as an indication of nonfunctional language—possibly a form of echolalia (meaningless repetition or echoing of verbal utterances), which is a condition exhibited by the majority of individuals with autism. Finally, Bartleby fits the third category stipulated by the *DSM* by manifesting restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior and interests. Here it is his "abnormally intense, insatiable drive to copy," as well as his adherence to "seemingly obscure patterns of behavior" such as never eating dinner, only eating ginger nuts, and refusing to leave the premises, that classify him as suffering from an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (272). Melville's prescient insight into the autistic condition could be explained by another recent study, according to which Melville himself might have suffered from Asperger's syndrome (Fitzgerald, 50–56)

One could speculate on the motivation behind such efforts to dissect a literary figure in compliance with medical–scientific techniques. For one thing, it might serve as a retrospective validation of contemporary hypotheses that are still under debate within medical science. It might also serve to personify a condition often imagined, in unambiguous terms, as extreme, unimaginable, or even in some way dehumanizing. In any case, the effect of applying science to analyze the *belle-lettres* is clear: it gives science a humanistic gloss, making it not only the answer for contemporary ills, but also the solution to mysteries of yore. The redemptive spirit is evident in an article in *Emory Medicine Magazine,* which yet again invokes Bartleby as a figure whose behavior mimics the autistic. Referring to the facilities available at the university, the reporter affirms that "at Emory's Autism Resource Center . . . the scene is very different from that depicted in 'Bartleby.' Here, persons with autism . . . can find resources to help them function in a world where social interchange is at the heart of almost all endeavors" (Carini).

Yet, not only has medical science found interest in Bartleby as autistic, but a number of literary and cultural critics have recently adopted this very diagnosis—albeit for very different reasons—into

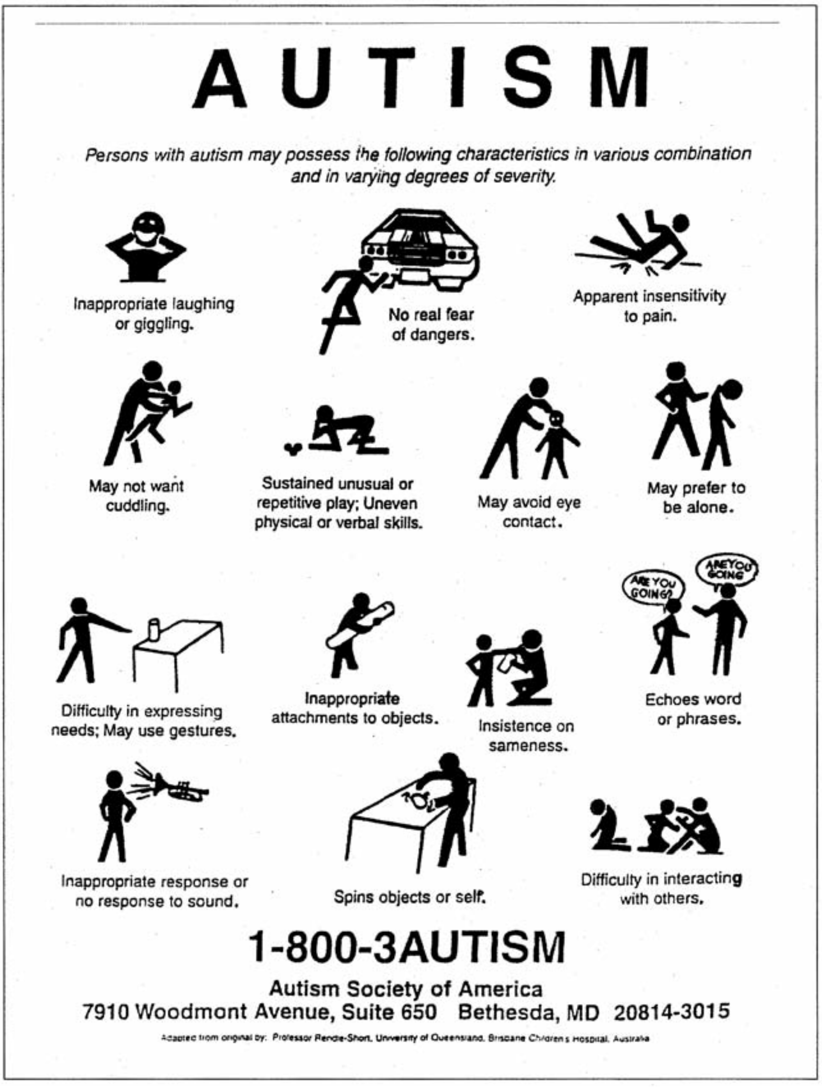

Figure 1. Autism Society of America poster. Adapted from original by Professor John Rendle-Short, University of Queensland, Brisbane Children's Hospital, Australia.

their work within the emerging field of disability studies. The central premise of this field is that disability—just like its complementary twin, normalcy—is a socially constructed concept. Disability comprises the various discourses—medical, legal, political, literary, cultural—by which the dominant paradigm of normalcy marginalizes its deviations. In other words, disability is the result of social power relations, not of

inherent properties; it is a political rather than a physical concern. Hence, the challenge, as Rosemarie Garland Thomson states, is "to move disability from the realm of medicine into that of political minorities, to recast it from a form of pathology to a form of ethnicity" (1997, 6). Or as Lennard J. Davis (1995) puts even more succinctly: disability is the missing term in the triad of gender, class, and race.[3]

Scholars have of late undertaken several attempts at casting autism in terms of the disability critique.[4] Bartleby figures in these attempts as well. Consider Garland Thomson's account of the scrivener. Although not regarding Bartleby as necessarily autistic (he "may be autistic, blind, schizophrenic, against capitalism, misanthropic—or all of these") she nevertheless deems him as a principle figure of disability "whose bodily appearance or function will not conform to cultural expectations and standards" (2004, 782–83). Through the narrator's narrative, she argues, it is possible to gain a glimpse into the underlying discourses informing modern concepts of suffering, specifically the historical transition from benevolence to pathology as a dominant cultural response to the unfit. What Bartleby personifies here is a figure that thwarts any attempt at reform—a problem that "prefers" not to be resolved. Thus, the scrivener both reflects and deflects what Garland Thomson has coined the normate: "the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings" (1997, 8).

Following Garland Thomson, Stuart Murray goes even further to regard Bartleby as perhaps the greatest literary text of "autistic presence." Rehearsing almost verbatim the diagnostic categories and vocabulary of the *DSM*, Murray claims (in perfect concurrence with the medical accounts above) that the depiction of the scrivener is "recognizably that of an autistic individual" (51). Yet he holds that what makes the story such a compelling narrative is the way it leaves the space of "autistic presence" undisclosed and open to interpretation. This puts Melville's story in the company of a rare few present-day texts, such as Temple Grandin's autobiographical writing and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time.* All are instances of positive representations of autism that, unlike many others, portray autistic figures who assert their preferences and their presence even if they remain largely misunderstood. Indeed, a recent

article in the *New York Times Book Review* points out the extraordinary incidence of autistic characters in contemporary fiction, which are typically portrayed in an extreme and distorted fashion. This ailment, it seems, holds a special appeal: in a time when medicine has demystified so many other conditions, autism remains tantalizingly unexplained and thus supplies writers with an almost unlimited source for metaphor (Morris 2005). As Murray suggests, Melville's story remains nonetheless a highpoint in its depiction of disability and difference in social behavior (60).

What the texts above outline is a debate between the medical and the cultural regarding the understanding of autism. However, it is possible to read this debate as underwritten by something more profound than the meaning of autism or even the challenge presented by disability. What is at stake here is the status of communication itself within social life. In the medical science view, the social is underpinned by reciprocal interaction, and thus any deviation or contravention is to be regarded as pathological—and then treated until cured. In the disability critique view, which criticizes the normalizing stance of medical science, the social should be about securing spaces for the nonnormative and nonreciprocal—the various instances of social disengagement, or what Erving Goffman identified as being "away" (69–70). If the former upholds communicability as what makes the social possible, the latter cultivates incommunicability as what makes the social hospitable. If for the scientific stance, to quote one expert, "it is no exaggeration to say that through understanding autism we can gain a better understanding of ourselves" (Frith, 19), for the critical stance the point is to "defamiliarize . . . identity categories by disclosing how the 'physically disabled' are produced" (Garland Thomson 1997, 6). The figure of Bartleby equally serves both sides, the one taking the scrivener as a model for the abnormal, the other making him a model for challenging the normal. Yet the contrast between the two stances cannot hide what remains indisputable in this debate: the pristine nature of intersubjective communication, which is the paradigm not only for the scientific stance but also for the critical, precisely because positioning itself as its opposite. Countering the normal on its own terms cannot but repeat these terms. It is only by thinking beyond the dichotomous and the dialectical that an alternative perspective on that which resists communication can arise.

LEGACIES OF SILENCE

As many have noted, Bartleby's anaphoric line, "I would prefer not to," does not constitute a refusal or the simplicity of a negative response. Maurice Blanchot claimed that this line does not fold neatly into distinctions of pro and con, for or against; rather, it expresses a radical form of passivity, "an abstention which has never had to be decided upon, which precedes all decisions and which is not so much a denial as, more than that, an abdication" (1995, 17). Refusal usually follows a cogent choice and is therefore the result of some kind of deliberate action. As the lawyer–narrator admits, if there had been any sign of renunciation in Bartleby's demeanor, he would have doubtless "violently dismissed him from the premise" (Melville, 120). Had he refused, he could have been ascribed with a social role. But Bartleby's line follows no such reasoning—it resists incorporation without the negative willfulness involved in resistance. "I would prefer not to" expresses neither defiance nor compliance but a "negative preference": the irreducible neutrality and the uncontainable passivity encompassed in Bartleby's response.

This "negative preference" does not seem to bear a semantic difficulty: it is understandable, and still seems to make no sense. It is not grammatically incorrect, yet its structure—ending with a negation and an indefinite preposition—undoubtedly composes an unusual statement. Gilles Deleuze argued that Bartleby's line has the form of an "agrammatical formula," and this formula ravages itself, everything around it, and ultimately language as a whole. As Deleuze puts it, this formula "hollows out a zone of indetermination that renders words indistinguishable, that creates a vacuum within language" (73). And at the same time, it unsettles all speech acts used by the lawyer to command, implore, and persuade. Similar to the way Bartleby's presence upsets the routinized order in the office, his formula dislodges language from the inside, making it confront its limit from within.

Giorgio Agamben has suggested that Bartleby's formula captures a fundamental potentiality in language that is manifested not so much in its capacity to signify something, but in its potential to signify nothing. And this expressible potential, the potential to express precisely nothing as such, is constitutive of language itself. "As a scribe who has stopped writing," writes Agamben, "Bartleby is the extreme figure of

the Nothing from which all creation derives; and, at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of this Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality" (2000, 253–54). Bartleby's formula marks a moment when language retreats from predication into a mode in which it appears to signify pure potentiality, precisely by virtue of stating nothing (see Heller-Roazen, 19–20). This formula, which hovers between affirmation and negation, acceptance and refusal, produces a singularly paradoxical speech act: a performative that performs nothing, a performative of nonperformance. Instead of the Shakespearian formula "to be or not to be," which collapses everything to an ontological binary, Bartleby's formula suggests a third possibility, irreducible to neither Being nor non-Being and exceeding both. The potentiality announced by Bartleby is arguably the basis for a new kind of ontology; indeed, as Agamben concludes, the basis for creation itself.

Elsewhere Agamben discusses another figure of radical passivity—the *Muselmann* (literally Muslim): the living-dead of the Nazi concentration camps, who, due to extreme starvation and exhaustion, appeared listless and unresponsive. Primo Levi famously described these figures as the "drowned": "Even if they had paper and pen, the drowned would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, to compare and express themselves. We speak in their stead, by proxy" (84). Following Levi, Agamben declares the *Muselmann,* who had lost the ability to bear witness, as the ultimate witness to the Holocaust—those who had faced the calamity in its entirety to the point of being consumed by it. Thus, those who managed to survive, like Primo Levi, bear witness to a missing testimony. The testimony of the *Muselmann,* the ultimate witness to the Holocaust, can be heard only as unspoken, a lacuna in the survivors' testimony, which nevertheless informs and ultimately gives rise to their testimony. It is the *Muselmann*'s silence that compels the witnesses not to remain silent. Bartleby and the *Muselmann* might now appear as sharing a certain affinity: if Bartleby embodies the undoing of the distinction between positive and negative, Being and non-Being, the *Muselmann* embodies the undoing of the distinction between life and death, human and inhuman. Yet this affinity only goes so far, for if Bartleby's inexpressibility is expressive

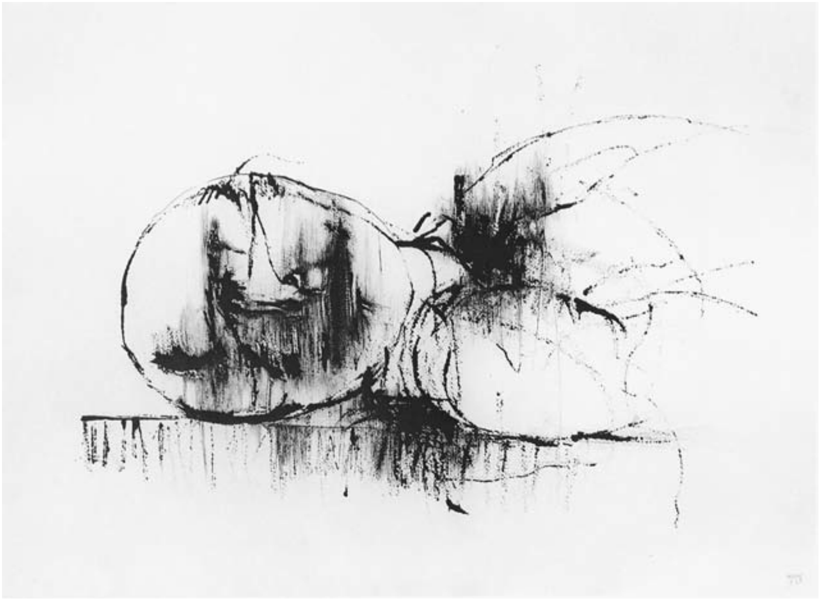

Figure 2. Leonard Baskin, *Bartleby the Scrivener:* Ink, 1958. Copyright Estate of Leonard Baskin. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York.

of the potentiality to express, the *Muselmann*'s voicelessness signals the utter destruction of that potentiality.

The first report on the *Muselmann* was published in 1943 by Bruno Bettelheim, who later went on to develop a most influential theory on infantile autism. Bettelheim had seen the *Muselmann* in Dachau and Buchenwald before he managed to escape to the United States, where he later made a career in autism research and treatment. Significantly, the *Muselmann* was for Bettelheim the principle model for understanding childhood autism. According to him, both conditions are extreme reactions to extreme situations: just as the *Muselmann* withdraws from the harsh reality in the camp and ultimately collapses inward, so the young child retreats from what is for him an unbearable reality, and consequently develops the disorder. However, if the perpetrators of the prisoners' distress were the SS guards, those responsible for the child's were the parents, especially the mother.[5] As Bettelheim affirms, "what was an external reality for the prisoner is for the autistic child his inner reality. Each ends up, though for different reasons, with a parallel experience of the world" (65). According to Agamben, Bettelheim's

project with autistic children can be understood as forming a kind of counter-camp to Dachau, a belated attempt to find a solution for the enigma of the *Muselmann:* "There is not one character trait in Bettelheim's detailed phenomenology of childhood autism . . . that does not have its dark precursor and interpretative paradigm in the behavior of the *Muselmann*" (2002, 46). It should be noted that this theory ultimately proved unfounded, but not before incriminating an entire generation of parents to autistic children.

Their differences notwithstanding, there seems to be a structural similarity between the figures of Bartleby, the *Muselmann,* and the autistic, as sketched above. It is their failure to speak that summons the production of speech by others who set out to tackle that failure. It is their incommunicativeness that obliges others to speak for them, on their behalf, or in their stead. The *Muselmann*'s missing testimony bears witness through the survivors' testimonies, which are forever marked by the untold story of those who had touched bottom. The autistic is spoken for by various experts and practitioners, speculating about this condition and about its relation to normal social exchange.[6] And Bartleby is the hollow nexus around whom the plot revolves, whose taciturnity makes the lawyer reach out to him again and again, and obsess about his "innate and incurable disorder"—indeed, it is what ultimately makes him narrate the story. Bartleby remains tongue-tied while rendering others loose-lipped. In fact, is this not the continuing effect of this story—making commentators (including this one) produce more communication around Bartleby, inviting us to venture another interpretation, to propose a new reading, to talk yet again about Bartleby?

Bartleby's preference not to communicate can be read as signifying a radical kind of otherness, an irreconcilable alterity both displaced and displacing. Bartleby emerges as a species of the Levinasian Other: the face that resists possession and comprehension yet is silently calling for a responsible response. The scrivener's passivity does not refuse the lawyer–narrator's authority, but altogether defuses it, as he confesses: "It was his wonderful mildness chiefly, which not only disarmed me, but unmanned me" (Melville, 128). The disproportion between the two characters is so great that the excess of power on the part of the lawyer results in a deactivation of power that is instituted paradoxically by the utter powerlessness of the scrivener (Pinchevski,

176). The scrivener's incommunicability can be understood as a salutary check on the lawyer's attempts at disciplinary exchange. As a limit-figure, Bartleby articulates an appeal that comes from the twilight of interaction, intimately close yet infinitely remote, an appeal that exposes language to the alterity within. Responding to such an appeal would mean transcending existing modes of interaction, venturing beyond the familiar, where responding is tainted by the uncertainty as to how to respond. It is in this respect that incommunicability breeds communication: Like vacuum that attracts matter, incommunicability is productive of communication itself. Bartleby is not extraneous to language; he is rather the core toward which language gravitates.

In his reading of Bartleby, Deleuze casts the relation between the lawyer and the scrivener as the dissolution of the paternal function, identifying in Melville a principal advocate of a fraternal system—a community of equal members united by alliance rather than filiation. Deleuze ascribes the idea of fraternity to the American political universe, for the American "is one who is freed from the English paternal function, the son of a crumbled father, the son of all nations" (85). Hence the lawyer–narrator's somber realization, "A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam" (Melville, 130), which comes after he learns that Bartleby was actually living in the office, can be viewed as documenting the rift between the paternal relation manifested by the working relations of a boss and his clerk, and the more abstract fraternal relation that makes the narrator and the scrivener members of a common humanity. The community Deleuze finds in Melville's story is "a community of anarchist individuals," a society that gives birth to "the new man or the man without particularities" (74). And this community, intimates Deleuze, is the community of celibates: the universe of fatherless but also childless brothers. America is the home of self-reliant bachelors like Melville's scrivener and Kafka's *Der Verschollene.*

Yet when considering the speech situation in which the lawyer and the scrivener are set, a different type of relation—indeed of community—is revealed. This relation is implied in the compound lawyer–narrator itself, which in fact signifies two different relations: the lawyer and Bartleby as contemporaries, as contemporaneous members of a community; and the narrator and the scrivener as separated by time, the former outlasting the latter, the narrator's report of Bartleby in

his absence. If the first relation is of fraternity and commonality, of the one vis-à-vis and together with the other (the relation sketched by Deleuze), then the second is the relation of the one speaking for the other, a bond beyond shared time and space, beyond coexistence and coevality. It is by virtue of having outlived the scrivener that the lawyer can become narrator and indeed bear witness to Bartleby. While as a lawyer he knew many scriveners, as a narrator he opts to tell the story of only one: "I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener the strangest I ever saw or heard of" (Melville, 109). What the story documents, then, is not only the shift from hierarchy to egality, as per Deleuze, but also the consequent move from egality to ancestry.[7] The lawyer–narrator is neither simply a paternal figure, nor merely a fraternal contemporary; he is also a successor, a descendent. So much for the community of celibates, as Bartleby's story is inherited by his former employer. Speaking for someone who cannot (or prefers not to) speak for himself institutes some kind of lineal responsibility, a verbal lineage, bearing witness to a silent forbear.[8]

This responsibility, this inheritance, is nevertheless inherently contradictory. For to speak on somebody else's behalf, to speak for someone who cannot, will not, or prefers not to do so themselves, involves some kind of disloyalty, even betrayal, which is necessary precisely to carry out this responsibility and execute this inheritance. Speaking in the wake of someone else's silence cannot but break that silence, transpose and dispose it, impel it to "speak."[9] When silence touches language it cannot remain senseless; it must be made to mean something, and hence must be sacrificed—sacrificed precisely to be heard. The responsibility to speak for the incommunicable, the absent, or the bygone inevitably entails some sort of ventriloquism. The obligation to give voice to the voiceless is never divorced from usurpation. An act of generosity that cannot be assumed without some measure of conceit—such is the predicament of surrogate speech. Hence the constitutive impossibility of speaking for what shuns speech: to speak for silence is at once to risk and redeem that silence, at once to obey and violate its legacy.[10] And as evidenced by the narrator and the many commentators that followed, Bartleby's legacy is not of taciturnity; far from it—it is of words, and many of them.

GENDERED COMMUNICATIONS

In *2010: Odyssey Two* (the sequel to *2001: A Space Odyssey*), Arthur C. Clarke continues the story of HAL 9000, the supercomputer gone awry on a mission to Jupiter. HAL's creator, Dr. Chandra, is sent to investigate the malfunction, but despite his efforts, the computer's performance is still faulty—at times ignoring spoken words, at other times giving verbal replies but refusing to print hard copy. Throughout the story, Clarke's prose refers to the computer in the singular masculine as "Hal," most notably when describing "his" acting up: "He would give no excuses or explanations—not even the stubbornly impenetrable 'I prefer not to' of Melville's autistic scrivener, Bartleby" (173). Hal appears as the science fiction doppelganger of the scrivener: an obstinate, autistic machine of the male kind. This intertextual allusion, which conflates technology, masculinity, and autism through the figure of Bartleby, might be telling of a more pervasive discourse whereby autism is transported into the social realm of gender and technology. This discourse, the origins of which lie with the advent of new communication technologies in the late nineteenth century, has come to inform the modern understanding of communication between the sexes.

As John Durham Peters has suggested, Bartleby can be read as a parable about the cold righteousness of dialogism and the generosity of dissemination (157–59). When called upon to engage in dialogue, Bartleby opts out, retreating to the no-man's-land of writing, copies, and dead letters. A veritable Derridean, Bartleby withdraws from presence and logos, from logocentrism and phallogocentrism, from the imposing urgencies of speech, opting for suspended communication, for the written mark rather than the spoken word. Bartleby is the impersonality in communication personified. His stance is of pure dissemination: like the dead letters office where he is rumored to have previously worked, he is amid undisclosed origins and unknown destinations. "Writing, like Bartleby, gives no answer; cannot be engaged in dialogue; is not 'particular,' as Bartleby says, of how it is used" (157). And the more he is pressed to converse and account for himself and his script, the less he writes and the closer he gets to becoming himself a dead letter. The scrivener's incongruity exposes the harsh premise underpinning dialogue: the invitation to converse holds only

insofar as one reciprocates in kind; opting out or preferring not to would likely be understood as offensive transgression.

But there is more at stake in Bartleby's disseminative stance than a rebellion against the dominance of speech. As he is a scrivener, his stance is predicated by the transcription apparatus within which he is situated. Having an exceptional knack for copying, he produces a prodigious amount of work, as the narrator attests: "As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents" (Melville, 118). Bartleby's extraordinary output is contrasted with his two fellow scriveners, Nippers and Turkey, whose ineptness is inimical to the perfunctory order of the law office. Working day and night, he performs his job "silently, palely, mechanically" (118). Melville has Bartleby work like a machine—like a writing machine—that feeds on its written products, resulting ultimately in the death of the famished scrivener (Benesch, 153). Yet, it is not only the scrivener's body that reaches its demise, but also the profession as a whole: Bartleby's machinelike labor anticipates the imminent replacement of the work of scriveners by the technology of typewriting. As Cornelia Vismann suggests, it is possible to see the scrivener as standing at the threshold of a new age without handwriting, the age of the typewriter, which from 1880 on was put to use in courtrooms and law offices (30). Bartleby's figure is thus both homage to the anachronism of script and prelude to the advent of typescript. Indeed, the manual scrivener almost preempts the technology of writing with his repetitive, mechanical toil, to the point where it is no longer clear whether he is a copyist or a typewriter.

That the demise of the scrivener marks the introduction of the typewriter is true in yet another sense. As Friedrich Kittler notes, the word "typewriter" has two meanings: both typing machine and female typist, who by the end of the nineteenth century came to replace practically all the men who had been working in the secretarial business in the United States (183). Typewriting inverted the gender of writing, or as Kittler puts it, "When men are deprived of the quill and women from the needle, all hands are up for grabs—as employable as employees" (187). Bartleby is therefore a member of a dying breed: male scriveners. Thus, if we continue to entertain the notion of Bartleby as autistic, his so-called autism could now be shown to be implicated by the relation between technology and gender. In other words, to

speculate on Bartleby's autism is effectively to consider a triangulated relation of autism, gender, and technology. To anticipate a point elaborated below, autism has been consistently reported as a gender-specific condition, affecting boys at least four times more than girls; furthermore, recent research even specifies technological inclination as suggestive of the disorder itself. If it were to occur today, a case of an eccentric, single male with a mechanical ability to transcribe documents would surely fit the profile. But before taking this issue further, it is instructive to consider some parallels to Bartleby's autism in modern fiction and popular culture.

In *Autism: Explaining the Enigma* autism researcher Uta Frith documents a host of fictional figures that, according to her, manifest different kinds of autistic intelligence. While Bartleby is missing from Frith's analysis, her account of other figures is nevertheless telling of

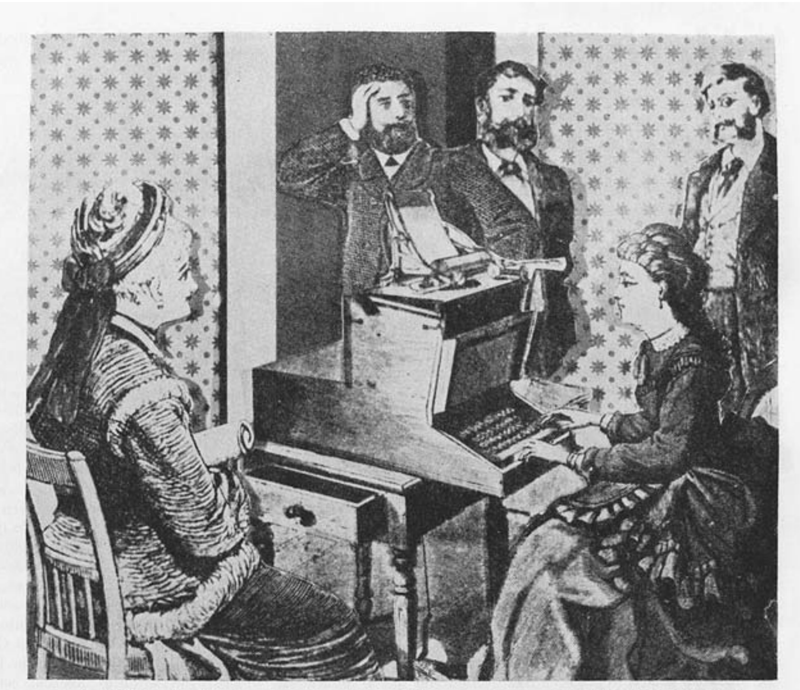

Figure 3. Original collage from *World Outlook,* May 1955, Board of Missions, Methodist Church. Image courtesy Protestant Family Collection, Divinity School Library, Duke University.

the scrivener. She argues, for instance, that Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle's eccentric detective, is reminiscent of exceptionally clever autistic people. His oddness conveys special powers of observation and deduction without the bother of social niceties. His single-mindedness in relation to solving the mystery is complemented by his absentmindedness in relation to other people. Dr. Watson can be seen as a foil to the socially challenged Holmes, serving as the detective's liaison to the outer world as well as the embodiment of Mr. Average, who is forever astonished at the detective's insight ("Elementary, my dear Watson"), especially when it comes to details overlooked by others. Indicating that people with autism often exhibit special, circumscribed interest with one thing or activity, Frith points out Holmes's almost obsessive preoccupation with smoking paraphernalia. Frith contrasts Holmes with Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, who, unlike Doyle's detective, solves the crime by intuition, immersing herself in the atmosphere and interpersonal fabric surrounding the case. What these two styles of crime-solving evince, in effect, are two basic communicative dispositions with a clear gender bias: the unyielding, detached, and taciturn male as opposed to the forthcoming, social, and affable female.

Another figure discussed by Frith is Tommy, the protagonist of The Who's 1969 rock opera (later also a movie and musical). Tommy becomes autistic-like after witnessing his mother's lover kill his father, who was presumed missing in action. Despite his mother's efforts, Tommy remains unresponsive: "And Tommy doesn't know what day it is . . . Surrounded by his friends he sits so silently, and unaware of everything . . . How can he be saved? From the eternal grave . . . Tommy can you hear me?" He is finally diagnosed by a specialist who declares: "He seems to be completely unresponsive, the tests I gave him showed no sense at all . . . No machine can give the kind of stimulation, needed to remove his inner block." Yet at the same time, Tommy exhibits an extraordinary talent for pinball, quickly becoming an international star and earning the title Pinball Wizard: "He stands like a statue, becomes part of the machine; Feelin' all the bumpers, always playin' clean; He plays by intuition, the digit counters fall; That deaf, dumb and blind kid, sure plays a mean pinball!" (The Who).

According to Frith, Pete Townshend, who wrote these lines, had a longstanding interest in the autistic disorder, which might explain

the strong autistic traits of the protagonist, especially his "strange and seemingly perversely effective system of sensory perception" (25).[11] At any rate, the story of Tommy rehearses rather accurately Bruno Bettelheim's, now debunked, theory of autism: an extreme response to extreme circumstances, typically caused by the parents. As such, it probably attests more to the intergenerational conflicts of the 1960s than to a plausible etiology of autism. But on another level, the story also attests to a displacement of the face-to-face by the interface. Like Bartleby, Tommy's point of contact with the world circumvents speech and interaction only to proceed through a device of which he is master. Both Tommy and Bartleby compensate for a communication disorder by an exceptional skill that manifests itself through some specialized apparatus.[12]

Science fiction also has its autistic-like figures, which are often endowed with paranormal powers such as telepathy and clairvoyance. A case in point would be the precogs in Philip K. Dick's *The Minority Report* (originally published in 1956), who produce incessant babbling that is analyzed by a computer to produce predictions about future crimes: "The three gibbering, fumbling creatures, with their enlarged heads and wasted bodies, were contemplating the future. The analytical machinery was recording prophecies, and as the three precog idiots talked, the machinery carefully listened" (9). Reminiscent of the Delphic Oracle, here technology bespeaks what is unfathomable for common ears. Interestingly, in the Steven Spielberg 2002 film version, Agatha, the female precog, is rather communicative while her two brothers, Dashiell and Arthur, remain utterly incomprehensible. Named after the three great authors of the detective fiction, they uncannily reproduce the basic dispositions of the authors' respective protagonists: the affability of Miss Marple and the detachment of Sam Spade and Sherlock Holmes.

Now insofar as autism research is concerned, science is not that far from fiction. A leading authority in autism research, Cambridge psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen, has recently proposed a unified theory of autism, biology, and human communication. In his book *The Essential Difference*, Baron-Cohen puts forward the following hypothesis: autism is a situation of the extreme male brain, which tends to be better at systemizing than empathizing. According to this theory, male and female brains are essentially different: the female brain is

hardwired for identifying with other people's feelings and emotional states; the male brain is hardwired for understanding and building systems. If women are superior folk psychologists, men are superior folk mechanics. Given the consensus among psychiatrists that the autistic disorder is much more prevalent in boys than girls, Baron-Cohen declares autism as a distinctively male disorder of defective empathy coupled with technical acumen. People with an extreme male brain, that is autistic, would focus their attention on one tiny variable, becoming so absorbed in it that they "might not notice if a person stood next to them with tears rolling down their cheeks" (134). This is because those with autism have "major difficulties with 'mindreading' or putting themselves into someone else's shoes, imagining the world through someone else's eyes and responding appropriately to someone else's feelings" (137). Looking for genetic influences in family background, Baron-Cohen indicates that, statistically, there is a higher rate of autism in the families of those talented in fields such as engineering, mathematics, and physics compared with those talented in the humanities. As for the extreme female brain, these would be people who are essentially technically blind, but have extraordinary ability to connect with other minds. Such would be, for instance, "an endlessly patient psychotherapist who is excellent at tuning in to your feelings," or those "with remarkable belief that others' minds are more transparent to them [and] their accuracy in such mindreading would need to be very good, since otherwise their belief in their own telepathy could simply be delusional" (174–75).

There is much to say about this theory and how it conceives the relation between gender, technology, and human communication. Here I would like to propose one observation by way of historical parallel, which will also bring us back to Bartleby. It was in 1848, five years before Melville's story was first published and four years after Samuel Morse introduced the telegraph, that modern spiritualism came into the world. The standard story is about the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New York, who began communicating with the rapping sounds coming from their roof one windy night. Soon the word was out that the Fox sisters had established a telegraph line to another world. Occurring in a time of profound social and technological change, spiritualism became a wide social movement, capturing the imagination of thousands for whom telecommunications was now with the living as

well as with the dead (Sconce, 44–50). Against the backdrop of Victorian patriarchal society, women were considered better mediums than men precisely because they were believed to be more "sensitive," "irrational," and "imaginative." As one scholar puts it, "Spiritualists deemed women particularly apt for mediumship because they were weak in the masculine attributes of will and intelligence, yet strong in the feminine qualities of passivity, chastity, and impressionability" (Walkowitz, 9). Toward the end of the century, women were also considered better telephone operators than men, and for very similar reasons; as an 1898 Canadian newspaper article states: "In the first place, the clear feminine quality of voice suits best the delicate instrument. Then girls are usually more alert than boys, and always more patient. Women are more sensitive, more amenable to discipline, far gentler and more forbearing than men" (cited in Martin, 59). The previously housebound women discovered a whole new line of work with the advent of the new communication technologies in the second half of the nineteenth century—typists, telephonists, psychics—relocating their domestic, "female qualities" into the masculine public sphere of the Victorian era.

To the extent that this historical parallel is tenable, it is possible to imagine the Fox sisters and Bartleby as standing at the dawn of a new era: the era of new communication technologies, specifically the mechanization of speech and writing in the form of the telephone, the typewriter, and the telegraph. And at the same time the era in which communication itself becomes a critical concern for the integrity of both private and public life, and hence an object for investigation, correction, and perfection. Indeed, it was only in the latter part of the nineteenth century that "communication" began to arise as an explicit problem for the human species, a problem whose horizons are marked by two words also coined around the same time: "solipsism" and "telepathy" (Peters, 5). However, it seems that once emerged, the problem of communication immediately becomes gender-specific, with its diametrical boundaries assigned to the masculine and the feminine, solipsistic and telepathic, respectively. Technology was for women precisely the opposite of what it was for men: a way into social communication rather than a way out of it. The marriage of gender and technology during the Victorian age gave birth to a specific kind of feminine mystique, the kind that deems women as singularly extroversive,

protracting thereby a communication gap between the sexes. Recall that there are no women in Melville's story, not even a passing reference. It is as though the drama of communication breakdown is strictly the business of men.

Imagine a Bartleby in the hands of some present-day "communication skills" professional. His preference not to interact would surely be taken as inexcusably obstinate, or worse, outright offensive. A veritable extreme male mentality: closemouthed, unavailable, and unwilling to share—the nightmare of any relationship counselor. As relationship guru John Gray declares in his *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (subtitled "A Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationships"), "unclear and unloving communication is the biggest problem in relationships," which is why it is "essential to learn new and healthy ways of relating and communicating" (61, 7). Ironically, the problem itself is embedded within innate gender communication differences, for in time of crisis "men become increasingly focused and withdrawn while women become increasingly overwhelmed and emotionally involved." Or in the shorthand version, which uncannily repeats the gender divide sketched above, "men go to their caves and women talk" (29). The story of women as hyper-communicative and men as communicationally challenged did not begin with such contemporary trends but goes back at least as far as Bartleby's time. In this respect, the genderization of communication, together with its normalization and pathologization, is part of a late-modern process whereby communication emerges as a social value to be cultivated. The production of communication as intrinsically wholesome thus implies a furrowed social terrain to be smoothed out by reciprocal interaction. It takes a Bartleby to show that rather than negation or deviation, incommunicability is in fact an underlying indeterminacy ripe with creative possibilities.

THE INCOMMUNICABLE THAT BINDS

During the 1960s and 1970s, Fernand Deligny, a French educator and psychiatrist, worked with autistic children who had been discarded by the psychiatric establishment. Rather than relating to them as patients—as cases to be treated and cured—he opted for a radical

alternative. For several months each year, Deligny lived with a group of autistic children in the countryside, disconnected from society. He did not try to teach them anything, did not attempt to change or help them; instead, he shared with them a common, simple existence without language. Living with autistics with no recourse to language had an ideological point: to do away with words and their abuse by the corrupted language of stigma and exclusion. He went on to form a network of such communes with a staff of assistants and volunteers in which the same kind of cohabitation took place. While living together, Deligny began to observe the way these children moved around the area. He began to map the routes they traced in their daily walks and through their everyday activities, as well as to mark the places where they stopped and lingered, retraced their steps, or did something unusual like hum a tune or clap their hands. These maps revealed the "customary lines" of routine activities and the "wandering lines" (*lignes d'erre*), "where the halts, returns, hesitations, and loops respond to invitations at once real and imaginary, decoded, opening into constellations and not closed into a system" (Joseph, 44). The latter kind of lines is intended with a double meaning: "wandering" (*erre*) as a way of moving aimlessly, meandering, walking for the sake of walking; but at the same time "to wander" (*errer*) as in to err, to go astray, digress, deviate.

Deligny (or rather, De-lign-y, for naming is sometimes destiny)[13] published a few texts on his work with autistics, but he did so quite reluctantly. He admitted that none would have been written if it had not been for outside pressure by the children's parents on one hand and the medical establishment on the other, demanding to know what was going on in those communes. The disparity between living with children without language and reporting to the outside world about that life brought him to develop an acute sense of the shortcoming of words. The word he used to describe this entanglement is "peroration," meaning both "to plead, to expose to the end" but also "to declaim, to speak in a pretentious manner, pompously" (1976, 7). He thus refused not only to cure or educate autistic children but also to speak on their behalf or to interpret their world for the outside world. He did not speak about these children like an expert, nor did he speak for them like a witness; he even recoiled from undertaking the task of a translator (in Walter Benjamin's sense). His aversion to functional

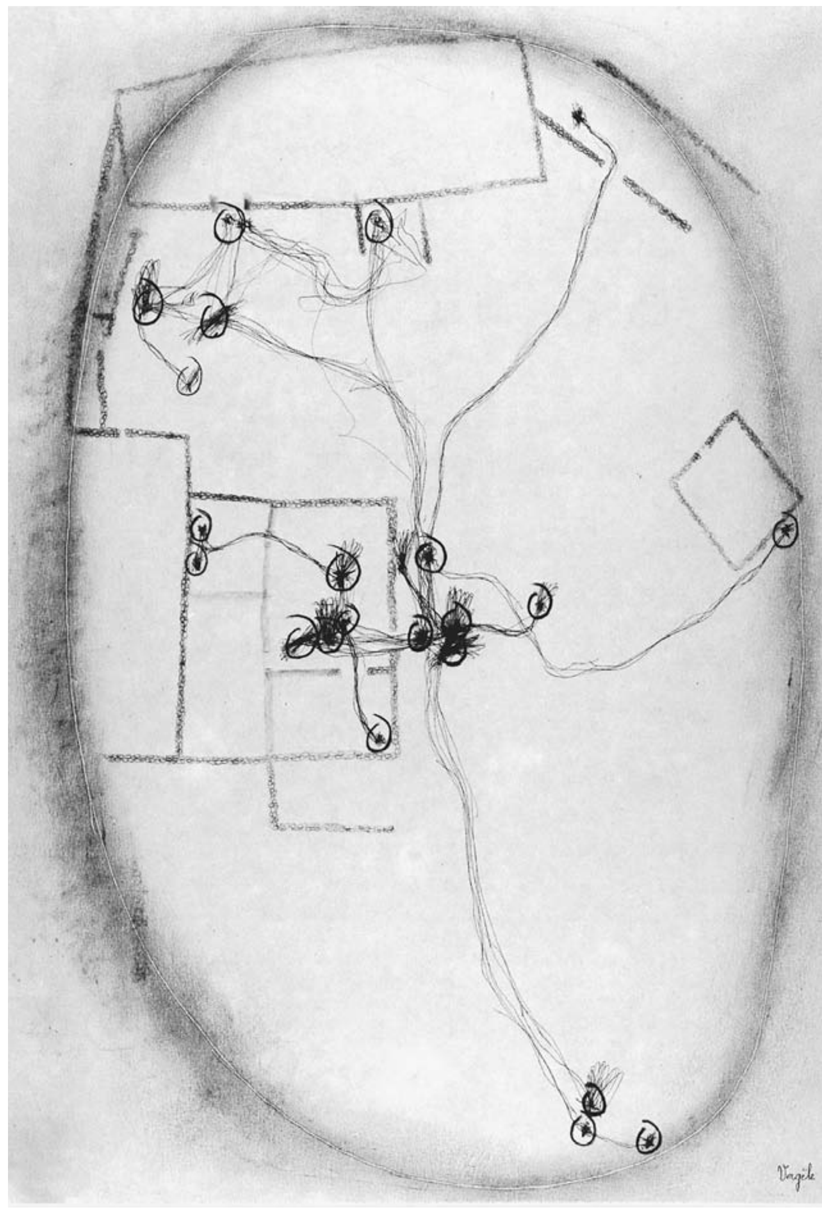

Figure 4. One of Fernand Deligny's maps tracing the movement of autistic children in their countryside living area. The encircling elliptical shape represents the customary line; extending from the center are the wandering lines (*lignes d'erre*) that terminate with flower-like shapes representing where the children stopped and acted unexpectedly (as can be seen, in relatively close proximity to one another). Reproduced from Cahiers de l'Immuable/3 ("Au défaut du langage"), *Recherches,* no. 24 (November 1976); Fernand Deligny, *Œuvres* (Paris: Éditions l'Arachnéen, 2007), 953. Courtesy Éditions l'Arachnéen (www.editions-arachneen.fr).

modes of communication is clear: "Communication, relation, information, transmission. All these words in 'tion,' they bring such cultural pollution that has to be filtered and refiltered" (55). What he opted for instead is a singularly tangential position: "What would it be like to have a mode of relation not useful to society, not utilizable, not used? A mode of relation out of function" (43). Deligny comes close to wandering along incommunicability without bespeaking it. He consequently turns to ordinary language as a last resort, not as a means of communication but as a means of protection, a way to ward off criticism and keep his communes as sheltered as possible. Had it been up to him, he would have preferred not to say anything, leaving the tracings he inscribed to bear out the undertaking. And these tracings, as Deligny often insisted, are devoid of any inherent meaning, signifying nothing of the autistic condition or of its treatment. If anything, they are the inscription of a common endeavor: a communal existence irrespective of language.

It is instructive to contrast Deligny's relation to the autistic children with the lawyer's relation to Bartleby. In both cases, an authority figure is faced with incommunicability, which greatly invalidates socially coded power relations between the two sides. In both cases, writing plays a peculiar auxiliary role: writing follows the gratuitous inscription of an inscrutable figure otherwise inaccessible to the writer. The lawyer becomes a writer with the telling of the story of a taciturn scrivener with a mysterious motivation for scribing; Deligny writes (albeit halfheartedly) of the spatial traces sketched by everyday routes of autistic children. Both Melville and Deligny are therefore compelled to put down on paper—whether in words or in lines—the habits of their respective impenetrable companions who seem to respond only "to the laws of magical invocations" (Melville, 127). Moreover, it is possible to sketch out in Melville's story a customary line in the scrivener's behavior and daily routines (his monotonous work, his repetitive line, his eating habits) as well as a wandering line—the sudden, unexpected halts, changes, and irregularities revealed in the story (suddenly refusing to copy, to move, to eat). Indeed, perhaps Bartleby's repetitive line, "I would prefer not to," is where the customary and the wandering lines meet, tracing the process the scrivener underwent from being a "fixture" in the office to "a vagrant, a wanderer, who refuses to budge" (145). Insofar as Deligny's writing is concerned, his

"true" writing is not of words but of trajectories, not of a story but of a map, the writing of a communal existence utterly exclusive of language, a secret map not to be deciphered by the speaking world. There is something of Melville's scrivener in Deligny, as well as in the children whose tracings he transcribed: latter-day Bartlebies, resisting communication while scribing away. Yet Deligny's enigmatic texts seem to bear out—through his tangled, convoluted, even capricious writing—those wandering lines he had sketched on maps. The spatial lines somehow infiltrated the written lines, revealing a lesson shared by the two writers, Melville and Deligny: that the only way to account for incommunicability runs between the customary lines and the wandering lines—the tracing of erring, the writing of an impossible communication.

Deligny's work is known mostly vicariously, chiefly through occasional references in the writings of Michel de Certeau and of Deleuze and Guattari. De Certeau invokes Deligny's wandering lines when speaking of the indeterminate practices of everyday life, casting these activities as exploratory trajectories by which people go through habitual routines. Deleuze and Guattari refer to Deligny's customary and wandering lines as analogous to their own speculations on molar lines, molecular lines, and "lines of flight" (1988, 202–3). In both cases, Deligny's lines are invoked as registering an elemental yet elusive stratum of existence that remains beyond any form of social consciousness, let alone representation within language. For de Certeau it is the "murmuring voice of societies" (vii), the multifarious ways by which the social is experienced and expressed as such, while for Deleuze and Guattari it is the "the Body without Organs," the unorganized matrix of flows and intensities, "the field of immanence of desire, the plane of consistency specific to a desire" (1988, 154).

Deligny's tracings, however, may reveal another sense of the social, one which prefigures more recent speculations on community such as Jean-Luc Nancy's "inoperative community," Maurice Blanchot's "unavowable community" (1988), and Giorgio Agamben's "the coming community" (1993). Notwithstanding their differences, what these discussions have in common is an attempt to rethink community in terms of difference (rather than sameness) and away from essence, telos, and logos—that is, beyond the traditional (ethnic, religious, ideological) notions of community. Community is not about fusion, not

a collective reiteration of a common foundation or common goal; nor is it a project to be built or achieved collectively. What founds community is rather a shared experience of finitude: the limits of life, language, and time. Community is what takes place between finite beings, mutually exposed to each others' mortality; it is where differences meet without merging, it is the difference that unites. To quote Nancy, community "assumes the impossibility of its own immanence . . . [it] acknowledges and inscribes—that is its peculiar gesture—the impossibility of community" (15). Put differently, community is precisely that which resists the reification of community, the collective undoing of any intrinsic notion of collectivity, the mutual sharing of an impossible sharing. Or again: community is the shared experience of non-commonality, the common undertaking of the uncommon.

Is this not precisely what Deligny's tracings attest to and in fact inscribe? Neither underlying commonality nor irredeemable otherness, what these lines reveal is the experience of being-in-common-as-different, a "common body" ungraspable by reason yet immanently palpable by the body. As Doina Petrescu suggests, Deligny's maps constitute a site of *rapprochement* shared by those who can speak and those who know silence, each contributing their own tracings, either by hand or by foot (91). The maps trace a "common" that does not communicate, which is refractory to language and to domestication by language. In Deligny's words: "the maps do not say much, they can only show that we *unknow* what is the human, as well as what is *the common*" (cited in Petrescu, 95). It is not coincidental that this insight arose from communal existence with autistics, for what Deligny's endeavor reveals is the elemental, though regularly concealed, nature of community: that it is made of internal rather than external borders, "that common autistic foundation we permanently posses" (Deligny 1975, 63–64). The "common" of community, its truth and cipher, remains forever incommunicable, beyond speech and language.

Which finally brings us back to Bartleby. In their speculations on Empire, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri invoke Bartleby as a figure of absolute refusal: "Bartleby appears completely blank, a man without qualities . . . a figure of generic being, being as such, being and nothing more" (203). Regarding the scrivener as a species of bare life, they conclude that Melville's story signifies the negation of the common and the termination of community.[14] Hardt and Negri further

argue that Bartleby's escape from authority, his "line of flight" (the Deleuzian version of Deligny's "wandering line"), is a completely solitary act that treads on the verge of social suicide—an utterly void act insofar as liberatory politics is concerned. What they advocate instead is the creation of a real alternative: "Beyond the simple refusal, or as part of that refusal, we need also to construct a new mode of life and above all a new community" (204). The reading proposed here, however, reveals a Bartleby that is actually closer to what Hardt and Negri prescribe than to what they repudiate, one that is amenable rather than inimical to formative configurations of community. Bartleby is not a figure of refusal but of undoing—the undoing of identity, order, and language—and as such epitomizes the plea for alternative constellations of the social bond. His preference "not to" does not signal the end of the relation but rather its beginning; his "line of flight" is not terminal to liberatory possibilities but rather inherently generative of them. It is the undoing of the common that makes the common; it is the interruption of communication that breeds communication.

The narrator's last words "Ah Bartleby! Ah Humanity!" can now be read more as an affirmation of an immanent bond than an acclamation of an intractable rift. Bartleby and the narrator are cast together to form an impossible togetherness, but a togetherness nevertheless. What brings them together is the act of writing: the scrivener's inscription on the one hand, the narrator's description on the other. Like the community of Deligny and the autistic children, the narrator and Bartleby come upon each other through the tracings of their common existence. Like the community of which Nancy, Blanchot, and Agamben spoke, Bartleby and the narrator are united by what separates them. Together apart, they produce the indeterminate writing of community, bearing out the incommunicable that binds.

Notes

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1. See, for instance, "Famous People with Autism Traits" at the Autism-World Web site (http://www.autism-world.com/index.php/2007/09/13/famous-people-with-autism-traits); "Famous People w/ Autistic Traits" at the Autism and PDD Support Network site (http://www.autism-pdd.net/testdump/test20155.htm); and "Memorable Fictional Characters Portraying Autistic Traits or Themes" on the Incorrect Pleasures blog (http://incorrectpleasures.blogspot.com/2006/11/memorable-fictitious-characters_3339.html) (all accessed April 4, 2011).

2. For examples of Bartleby as a schizophrenic, see Abrams; Beja; and Blake (curiously, all published in 1978). It should be noted that autism was initially considered a form of schizophrenia (both terms were coined by Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler); see Mesibov, Adams, and Schopler. Leo Kanner's seminal 1943 paper "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact" is regarded as the first classification of autism as a separate syndrome (see Kanner, 1–43).

3. For discussions on the question of disability see Linton; Mitchell and Snyder; Siebers; Nussbaum, 96–216; Snyder and Mitchell.

4. See, for example, Hacking, 104–24; Holmer-Nadesam; Murray; Osteen, 1–47.

5. A similar theory, which also had to do with communication breakdown between mother and child, was introduced around that time with respect to schizophrenia. See Bateson, 194–278.

6. This is indeed the key point of the disability studies critique. See Murray, 60.

7. According to Jacques Rancière, Deleuze's reading of *Bartleby* as a fraternal vision, although masterful, stops short of addressing the greater Deleuzian project of replacing models and copies with becomings (146–64). Rancière takes Deleuze's metaphor of fraternity as "a wall of loose, uncemented stones, where every element has a value in itself but also in relation to others" (Deleuze, 86) to be self-defeating, as it symbolizes the nonpassage to a Deleuzian politics. The reading presented here of the productive and reproductive potential of Bartleby may offer a possible way through that nonpassage whereby the horizontal dimension of fraternity is replaced by a vertical dimension of lineality—back to a paternal relation, only this time in reverse, with Bartleby as the progenitor, having been survived by his textual offspring, the narrator. The community established thereby is the community of writing, a version of which is discussed in the last section below.

8. Branka Arsic also comments on the witnessing underway here, but takes a different route (133–54).

9. This is the core of Jacques Derrida's critique of Michel Foucault's attempt in *Madness and Civilization* to convey the historical silence of the mad: "Like non-meaning, silence is the work's limit and profound resource" (1978, 54).

10. It is instructive that Derrida resorts to the story of Bartleby when discussing the archetypical story of responsibility and sacrifice—and of inheritance—the biblical story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (2007, 74–76). To assume absolute duty to the law of God, Abraham must commit the absolute crime, to undertake

the ultimate betrayal of his son, so as to adhere to the divine rule. Hence, for Derrida, following Kierkegaard, the biblical story upholds the irrecusable paradox of responsibility.

11. In the liner notes of the 1996 reissue CD of *Tommy,* Townshend is quoted as saying, "There was a parallel within the shape of the autistic child, so the hero had to be deaf, dumb, and blind so that seen from our already limited point of view, his limitations would be symbolic of our own."

12. Other versions of communicationally challenged characters in contemporary popular culture are those whose deviation from the normative is somehow offset by unparalleled mental talents. A memorable example is Raymond, the character played by Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man,* who is an autistic savant with superb recall, which comes in handy when his brother, played by Tom Cruise, takes him to a card game in Las Vegas. Another, perhaps less distinctive type, is the proverbial geek, the socially awkward, introverted young man prevalent in many college flicks, who is heavily invested in science, technology, mathematics, and the like, preferring to spend his time in front of the computer or playing video games rather than partaking in social activities.

13. I owe the onomastic observation to John Durham Peters.

14. For an extensive account on Hardt and Negri's conception of the common, see Casarino and Negri, 1–40. Negri criticizes Agamben's reading of Bartleby as a limit figure, arguing that "the limit is not creative. The limit is creative to the extent to which you have been able to overcome it qua death: the limit is creative because you have overcome death" (155). While the reading proposed here does not confront this question directly, I would respond that the limit is creative precisely because you can never truly overcome death. Slavoj Žižek also criticizes Hardt and Negri's use of Bartleby, though from a difference perspective (see 381–85).

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