

Nora Weinelt

Bartleby, or How Not to Be a Failure: The Malfunctioning Subject in 19th Century Work Environments

Abstract: *This paper examines a figure of thought that emerged in many Western capitalist societies in the mid-to-late 19th century: the idea that it is possible for the subject to 'be a failure'. Looking at the English expression as well as at its German and French equivalents, I attempt to show how the concept of 'being a failure' – in contrast to the potentially transcendent quality of tragic failure – implies a mode of non-fulfilment that is informed by contemporary thermodynamic, biological, and economic discourse. 'Failure' originally meant the sudden omission or cessation of an expected performance, usually by a machine, a technical device, or a tool. By the end of the 19th century, however, 'being a failure' had also come to characterize individuals, thus describing the failing subject as a technically non-functioning or malfunctioning one. This semantic extension first occurred in the context of work, particularly in the context of white-collar work. In this paper I will compare two mid-to-late 19th-century narratives whose protagonists perform (or rather fail to perform) one specific historical form of such work that seems especially designed to engender the subject as failure, that of the handwriting copyist. Italo Svevo's *Una vita* insists on Alfonso's being a failure, whereas Herman Melville's short story about Bartleby, the Scrivener explicitly refuses to portray Bartleby as a failure, even though he does not perform his given tasks. Both texts, however, employ notions of de-subjectification, (in)transitivity, and ascription in order to articulate what it might mean for the subject not simply to fail but to 'be a failure', an articulation that is all the more interesting because it seems largely inconceivable within current discourses about work, subjectivity, and failure.*

Keywords: Failure, being a failure, office workers, Italo Svevo, *Una vita*, Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*

Fail Better, Fail Faster, Fail Forward

In business, “nothing fails like success”, as an American saying goes, but for the last two or three decades especially, the opposite seems to be

true: nothing succeeds like failure. Failure, so the neoliberal metanarrative suggests, is not only an acceptable stage of the work process – it is *needed* in order to make progress, a prerequisite for creativity and productivity. Bill Gates, a Harvard dropout, founded his first business Traf-O-Data in the 1970s – but with “virtually no customers”¹ in the history of its existence, it didn’t last very long. Steve Jobs, another college dropout and Gates’ life-long rival, shared a similar fate: He was famously fired from his own company in the 1980s. Both Gates and Jobs succeeded regardless of their failures, or, as many would argue, precisely because of them. In the last thirty years, the business model of the start-up – typically scalable, technology-based companies with high failure rates – has become the epitome of a new concept of ‘failing better’ that has infiltrated the way we look at success, most prominently in the United States, but also, although maybe to a lesser extent, in the UK and throughout Europe.

Creating a master narrative around one’s own failure seems to be the most important cultural technique of ‘failing better’, judging from the trillions of FailCons, Pep Talks, and failure affirming self-help books. Successful entrepreneurs speak about their rocky road to the top, necessarily in hindsight. It is not without irony that the allegedly self-empowering gesture of embracing failure is only available to those who have not failed, at least not for good. The voices of those who have never made it very far, on the other hand, by definition cannot be heard – ‘true’ or persistent failures know nothing of success. The neoliberal concept of failure that has been so prevalent in recent years thus creates a dialectic of reassurance: the more failure is talked about, the less it is unamendable failure that is being talked about. The voices within this discourse of failure might have failed at some point in their lives, but in the end, they are no total failures. Zach Klein, co-founder of the video platform Vimeo and one of many tech entrepreneurs who like to talk about failure, seems to confirm this observation, at least judging from a well-known quote that is attributed to him: “When something you make doesn’t work, *it* doesn’t work, not

1 As described by Traf-O-Data co-founder Paul Allen in *Newsweek*. Allen, Paul: “My Favorite Mistake. Paul Allen”. *Newsweek*, 24.4.2011, retrieved 4.4.2020, from <https://www.newsweek.com/my-favorite-mistake-paul-allen-66489>.

you. *You, you work. You keep trying.*"² As comforting as this assertion may be, its plausibility remains uncertain. My paper will examine a figure of thought that suggests otherwise and has been thoroughly neglected in contemporary discourses of failure: the idea that it is in fact possible for a subject to *be a failure*, in and of itself, irredeemably and hopelessly so.

Being a Failure, *versagen*, *rater*

The concept of a kind of failure that is deeply and irreducibly tied to the subject itself is, as I want to argue, specific to Western capitalist societies and thus specifically modern. The English expression 'to be a failure' (as opposed to 'to fail') as well as the corresponding German verb *versagen* (as opposed to *scheitern*) and the French verb *rater* (as opposed to *échouer*) imply a decidedly unheroic, banal mode of non-fulfilment that doesn't allow for second chances. While this can also be said about the more ancient idea of tragic failure, the idea of 'being a failure' defies any potential for an epistemological surplus value, any notion of transcendence.³ On the contrary, this modern idea, whose origins are to be found in 19th century mechanical and thermodynamic thought, perceives the failing subject as a technically non-functioning or malfunctioning one. The term 'failure' originally described a sudden break from what was to be expected, in mechanical contexts ("a total defect", as Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary put it) and with respect to biological events (for example the "*failure of crops*").⁴ In the early 19th century, failure was seen as an "omission" or a "non-performance"⁵ rather than a poor performance in a work environment – or, for that matter, in life. Consequently, the expression 'to be a

2 As cited in Christensen, Tanner: "What it really means to fail". *Creative Something*, 29.8.2013, retrieved 4.4.2020, from <https://creativesomething.net/post/59676599532/what-it-really-means-to-fail>.

3 For a more in-depth discussion of tragic failure and its epistemological value in the ancient tragedy, see Schmitt, Arbogast: "Menschliches Fehlen und tragisches Scheitern. Zur Handlungsmotivation im Sophokleischen 'König Ödipus'". *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 131, 1988, pp. 8–30.

4 Webster, Noah: *Webster's Dictionary 1828. Online Edition*. Retrieved 4.4.2020, from <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/failure>. Italics in the original.

5 Ibid.

failure' is never mentioned in Webster's first dictionary edition, nor is its potential opposite: to be a success.

A similar semantic history can be traced for the German *versagen* and, albeit in a far more specific way, the French *rater*. Up until the middle of the 19th century, *versagen* primarily meant 'to refuse',⁶ thus referring to both the act of speaking itself (*sagen*) and a notion of free will, which seems to be absent from today's idea of being a failure. One of the expressions in which the verb *versagen* was most often used was *den Dienst versagen* – to deny service. While *den Dienst versagen* almost exclusively described a voluntary refusal in Middle High German and up until around 1800, it slowly grew to extend its meaning over the course of the 19th century – and was soon applied to failing technical devices and/or energetic systems such as explosives or, first and foremost, rifles.⁷ In this context, *den Dienst versagen* did not connote a wilful denial. To the contrary, *versagen* was used to underscore the inexplicability of the rifle's failure to carry out the service for which it had been designed. The rifle failed for reasons unknown to the men who had been relying on its proper functioning. Soldiers in particular were confronted with a sudden non-performance of devices that were expected to work yet simply did not. The idea of a rifle that fails is also at the etymological root of the French term *rater*, even if in a rather curious way: *rater*, from the corresponding noun *le rat*, originally referred to the unexpected non-functioning of a weapon because of rats that were suspected to have done unnoticeable damage in the storage room.⁸

6 Cf. Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm: *Deutsches Wörterbuch*. Vol. 25. Ed. Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften Berlin. dtv: München 1984, col. 1031.

7 Compared to other potentially failing devices or systems, failing rifles are mentioned disproportionately often in 19th century functional texts – possibly because they pose a much greater threat to personal and national safety. For a contemporary example, see Rüstow, Caesar: *Die Kriegshandfeuerwaffen. Eine genaue Darstellung ihrer Einrichtung in den europäischen Armeen, ihrer Anfertigung, ihres Gebrauchs und ihrer allmäligen Entwicklung*. Vol. 2. Bath: Berlin 1864, S. 171.

8 "On dit, qu'une arme a pris un Rat, lorsque le Chien s'est abattu, & que l'arme n'a pas pris feu." Cf. Backer, Georges de: *Dictionnaire de Proverbes François, avec l'Explication de leur Significations, et une partie de leur Origine*. George de Backer: Bruxelles 1710, lemma *rater*.

All of these examples, a failing rifle as well as a failure of crops and, more broadly, a total defect, in one way or another represent closed energetic systems that are subject to the first law of thermodynamics, one of the most important scientific discoveries of the 19th century. Conceptualized by Robert Mayer in 1842,⁹ it asserted that the total energy of a system (plus its surroundings) is conserved at any time, thus allowing one to quantify and determine the energy level within a closed system – energy input generally equals energy output. Failure, or *Versagen*, however, described something inexplicable and, according to the laws of thermodynamics, downright impossible: systems in which energy had been inserted did not work as expected, despite all efforts to calculate cause and effect or to foresee the way the system was going to behave. The events (or rather: non-events) to come could neither be predicted nor prevented or controlled. The thermodynamic worldview soon started to expand to fields other than physics themselves, most notably to the science surrounding the energetic system that is the human body. Until today, terms such as ‘heart failure’ (*Herzversagen*) or ‘kidney failure’ (*Nierenversagen*) describe the sudden omission of an expected bodily function, for reasons unknown. From there, the concept slowly started to apply to the subject as such: functional failure transitioned into a constitutional failure, the constitutional failure we speak of today when we say that somebody *is* a failure.

While the idea of technical, mechanical, or biological failure is not mysterious per se, let alone metaphysical, it did have a certain unexplained quality in the 19th century. Even though none of the above-mentioned systems or devices showed visible outer signs of dysfunction, they did not work, and even though a seed had been planted or a trigger pulled, the expected outcome was inexplicably not met. This is not to say that there was no way of understanding the cause of failure at all; there might very well have been one – retrospectively and in a more advanced scientific setting. In the immediate situation and for the naked eye, however, there was

9 James Prescott Joule and Ludwig August Colding worked out equivalent findings simultaneously. For a more comprehensive discussion of thermodynamics, see Müller, Ingo: *A History of Thermodynamics. The Doctrine of Energy and Entropy*. Springer: Berlin 2007, pp. 9–46.

none. Failure, therefore, seemed to originate from within a flawed system or device itself rather than from an external mishandling or mistake.

The English term ‘failure’ in particular referred to one very specific flawed system from early on: to the financial system. Other than the failure of crops or a total defect, Webster’s 1828 dictionary mentioned a “breaking, or becoming insolvent”¹⁰ that implied the sudden cessation of cash flow. In his study *Born Losers. A History of Failure in America*, Scott A. Sandage has shown how in the early 19th century, failure was thought of as “an incident, not an identity”.¹¹ The omission of performance or the cessation of supply was a singular event, not a state or, even worse, a character trait. The Panic of 1819, the first major financial crisis in the United States, and the second crisis of 1837, which hit even harder, unmistakably showed that failures could occur unpredictably – and to anyone. “Earlier economic dips had obvious, tangible causes like drought, revolution, or wartime embargoes”,¹² Sandage writes, but the unprofitable years following the Panic of 1819 seemed to “mysteriously come from within the economic system itself. Without obvious reasons, processes of production and exchange went awry.”¹³ Financial failure just happened, all of a sudden and seemingly out of nowhere, and most importantly with no one to blame.

At the same time, however, the problem of financial failure turned out to be of ever-increasing importance within a society that unconditionally believed in entrepreneurship, competitive effort, and economic growth. The so-called Market Revolution, which began after the British-American War of 1812 and picked up speed in the 1820s, led to the development of a relatively differentiated national economy, fuelled by the Industrial Revolution (of which the Market Revolution was a result), the war that had brought imports from Europe to a halt, and ongoing westward expansion. In the Land of Opportunity, which based its identity on the spirit of

10 Webster 1828.

11 Sandage, Scott. A.: *Born Losers. A History of Failure in America*. Harvard UP: Cambridge, London 2006, p. 11.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

13 Rothbard, Murray N.: *The Panic of 1819. Reactions and Policies*. Columbia UP: New York, London 1962, p. ii.

discovery and adventure, the dream of rising from rags to riches and, more generally, the pursuit of happiness were increasingly seen as an obligation rather than an option, and the 'self-made man', a phrase and myth coined by Henry Clay in a speech before the Senate in 1832, came to epitomize the good American citizen.¹⁴ In this regard, business performance emerged as a *pars pro toto* for life performance, and accordingly, financial failure, as little as it may have had to do with personal mistakes in the first place, quite literally started to compromise a man's value and valuation.

While *losing* money was an acceptable risk that was riding on every business adventure, the possible consequence of *not having* any money fundamentally contradicted the American doctrine of "the duty of the individual toward the increase of his capital".¹⁵ In a society that was, probably more than any other, impregnated by both a *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, as Max Weber famously claimed, financial failure posed not only an economic problem, but also an ethical and even a juridical one: wealth was interpreted as a sign of predestination, while bankruptcy, the most detrimental outcome of financial failure, constituted a criminal offence that led to substantial prison time until 1833.¹⁶ "The merchant obviously believes the State street proverb that nobody fails who ought not to fail", Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his journal in 1842, "[t]here is always a reason, *in the man*, for his good or bad fortune, and so in making money."¹⁷ And a later edition of Noah Webster's dictionary, published posthumously in 1857, offered an adjusted definition of

14 Outlined in greater detail in Irvin G. Wylie's pivotal study on *The Self-Made Men in America. The Myth of Rags to Riches*. Rutgers UP: New Brunswick 1954.

15 Weber, Max: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Routledge: London, New York 2005, p. 17.

16 Over the course of the 19th century, a number of bankruptcy acts were approved and repealed shortly afterwards. It was not until the Act of 1841 that entrepreneurs were granted the right of voluntary bankruptcy and debt relief for the first time, a possibility that had not existed previously as legislation had mainly been focusing on creditors' rights. Cf. Campbell Black, Henry: *A Treatise on the Law and Practice of Bankruptcy. Under the Act of Congress of 1898*. Vol. 1. Beard Books: Washington, D.C. 2000, p. 1.

17 Emerson, Ralph Waldo: *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, quoted after Sandage, p. 46. Italics Sandage's own.

failure: “some weakness in a man’s character, disposition, or habit”.¹⁸ In the early 1800s, Americans ‘made failures’, as Sandage¹⁹ points out – an expression that implied a potential individual contribution, a mistake for example, but did not extend to the subject as such. By the end of the century, however, ‘*being a failure*’ had become a metaphor for financial fiasco and total loss, for a profound and irredeemable ineptitude.

Failures in the Office

It is not surprising, then, that the semantic shift from a term for a sudden omission or cessation to an idiom describing a person that doesn’t work properly occurred in the context of – work. Stripped off its original meaning, ‘to be a failure’ is today, more than anything, a biographical category, but it still implies the unexplained absence of a performance that was expected: performance in life and, inseparably, always also performance at work.²⁰

Although the risk of underperforming (or not performing at all) is not limited to a specific professional field, there is a certain type of worker that is, at least as far as 19th century literature is concerned, especially likely to think of himself or herself (typically ‘himself’) or to be thought of by others as a failure: the white-collar worker, the office clerk, or the worker who is included in the notoriously difficult to translate German term *Angestellte*.²¹ Until today, people who do not ‘work’ but

18 Webster, Noah: An Explanatory and Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language, with Synonyms, quoted after Sandage, p. 12.

19 Sandage, p. 11.

20 As a biographical category, the concept of ‘being a failure’ does not follow any objective standards of judgment. Whether or not someone’s life might be seen as a failure very much depends on social circumstances (financial background, family education level etc.) and on goals and expectation that are being set accordingly. While not getting into a top school, for example, might lead to a feeling of ‘being a failure’ for some, for many first-generation academics it most likely will not.

21 Generally speaking, *Angestellte* are private-sector employees whereas *Beamte* work in public institutions, although the two do intersect frequently. While there has been an ever-continuing sociological discussion around defining characteristics of *Angestellte* – they tend to be middle-class brain workers, yet a High Street sales assistant is *angestellt*, too –, there seems to be quite a clear cultural iconography surrounding the term: In films or TV series (*The Office*

‘labour’²² are less prone to ‘being a failure’ – thanks to what Marx called the alienation from the products of their labour and, ultimately, from their labour as activity itself:

Labour’s realisation is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realisation of labour appears as *loss of realisation* for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object and bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*. [...] [T]he worker is related to the *product of his labour* as to an *alien* object. [...] Whatever the product of his labour is, he is not.²³

While labourers are, according to Marx, indeed instruments used for production, and therefore much more closely related to the idea of a dysfunctional tool or device than office clerks are, they generally do not identify with their work or its product. *Being* a failure in its most literal sense, however, requires just that: a good amount of personal (yet often involuntary) involvement with one’s own work, so much so that professional failure extends to every other aspect of life, and eventually to one’s whole existence as such.

It is striking how often early literary texts that centre on their protagonist’s being a failure, usually from the second half of the 19th

and its German adaption *Stromberg* come to mind), *Angestellte* work in an office, usually wearing some sort of business attire and being concerned with a more or less intellectual type of task. For a more detailed description, see Siegfried Kracauer’s famous 1930 study on *Angestellte* as a then (relatively) novel group of workers: Kracauer, Siegfried: *Die Angestellten. Aus dem neuesten Deutschland*. Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a. M. 1971.

- 22 Raymond Williams describes how ‘labour’, a term that originally referred to all kinds of productive work, “came to mean that element of production which in combination with capital and materials produced commodities” in the 19th century. Until today, terms and expressions such as ‘labour costs’ or ‘labour movement’, which go back to the Marxist tradition, imply “the specializations of the capitalist period”. Williams, Raymond: *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Oxford UP: Oxford, New York 2015, pp. 128, 131. In more recent academic critiques of work in contemporary society, however, some authors have opted to use ‘work’ and ‘labour’ interchangeably in order not to essentialize the very conception of work they want to call into question. Cf. Weeks, Kathi: *The Problem with Work. Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwar Imaginaries*. Duke UP: Durham, London 2011, p. 15.
- 23 Marx, Karl: *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Progress Publishers: Moscow 1974, pp. 63–64. Italics in the original.

century, are concerned with the specific work environment of the office and the specific form of subjectification it entails. Alfonso Nitti, for example, the protagonist of Italo Svevo's 1892 novel *Una vita* ("A life"),²⁴ whose being a failure is already alluded to through his last name,²⁵ leaves his rural hometown to pursue a career in a bank in Trieste, one of the most important commercial cities of the Habsburg Empire. As a small accountant, Alfonso has to copy balance sheets and letters day in and day out, lacking both talent and interest for his job. He is physically unable to write for as long as he is expected to. His hand gets tired quickly, and, what is more, he is intellectually unable to focus on his copy and to keep copying without making mistakes. His failure to do so is often referred to in stunningly mechanistic terms. The narrator, who is especially critical of his main character's undertakings, affirms that Alfonso "did not know how to copy mechanically",²⁶ but also connects his (non-)achievements at work to a more fundamental problem, akin to Webster's "total defect": his body, the alleged cause of his poor performance, is described as inexplicably

24 Svevo, Italo: *Una vita*. In: *Opera Omnia II. Romanzi*. Ed. Maier, Bruno. Dall'Oglio: Milano 1969, pp. 131–426. Indicated pages will refer to the Italian edition, all translations my own.

25 'Nitti' is reminiscent of both the Italian word *niente* ('nothing') and its German equivalent *nichts* or *nix*, as Victor Brombert has pointed out, cf. Brombert, Victor: *In Praise of Antiheroes. Figures and Themes in Modern European Literature 1830–1980*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago 2001, p. 62. The fact that Alfonso's name relates to both languages is no coincidence: Svevo, born to a Jewish family as Aaron Hector Schmitz in the then Habsburgian town of Trieste, grew up with the local Venetian dialect as his mother tongue. At the age of twelve, he was sent to a boarding school near Würzburg (Bavaria) in order to learn German, a language his father considered important for his future career in trade. He did not speak Standard Italian, the language he would eventually write his three novels in, until he was an adult – a fact he acknowledged in his pseudonym Italo Svevo, which translates to 'Italian Swabian'. Svevo's literary work famously combines the various linguistic and cultural influences he encountered, to the point of being deemed an outsider within Italian literature itself. In this respect, his take on office workers may be seen as representative for Central Europe in a broader sense, not just for one specific country. For a more in-depth account of Svevo's intellectual formation, see Camerino, Giuseppe A.: *Italo Svevo e la crisi della Mitteleuropa. Edizione ampliata e completamente riveduta*. (Critica e letteratura 34). Liguori: Napoli 2002, pp. 9–76.

26 Svevo 1969, p. 140.

weak,²⁷ and even though Alfonso spends most of his free time trying to strengthen it, the results of his efforts leave much to be desired. There is no diagnosable illness and therefore no cure: “It wasn’t the good will that he was lacking”, the narrator states, “it was the capacity; his defect was an organic one”.²⁸ Alfonso does not fail – he is a failure in his very existence.

Consequently, what started off as a very specific form of non-performance – as the failure to copy mechanically –, soon expands to Alfonso’s whole life. Despite his obvious lack of talent and the fact that he dreads his job, Alfonso is left with no other choice than continuing to do it; for financial reasons on the one hand, but also and more importantly because it seems to be critical to the future he envisions for himself within Triestine bourgeois society. He must succeed at his role in the bank in order to one day be able to do a more suitable kind of work, preferably as an author. In the meantime, his only chance to not only progress within the hierarchy of the bank, but to eventually progress *out of* the hierarchy of the bank is Signor Maller, his employer and only connection to the city’s upper class, who regularly invites his employees to his salon events, weekly gatherings from which Alfonso hopes to benefit in his attempt to climb the social ladder. In the beginning, the evenings at Casa Maller do indeed work in Alfonso’s favour, so much so that Annetta, Maller’s daughter, wants him to marry her. At least at this point of Alfonso’s ‘career’, the comparison the text draws on several occasions between Alfonso and some of literature’s greatest parvenus – Stendhal’s Julien Sorel, for example – seems apt.²⁹ Over the course of the novel, however, it becomes increasingly clear that Alfonso’s failure to perform his tasks in the office results in his failure to ascend not only in the bank, but also in society more generally: Maller and Annetta as well as most of his colleagues and salon acquaintances have eventually come to think poorly of him and his capacities, and the only way left

27 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 181.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

29 Besides Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le Noir*, *Una vita* also references Maupassant’s *Bel Ami*, cf. Micali, Simona: *Asceso e declino del “uomo di lusso”. Il romanzo dell’intellettuale nell’Italia Nuova e i suoi modelli europei*. Le Monnier: Firenze 2008, esp. pp. 194–196.

for Alfonso to redeem himself is through the work he has already been doing unsuccessfully. Alfonso, who finally accepts his being a failure in the eyes of the Triestine bourgeois society, ends up killing himself; he dies an *inetto*, an inapt person, a term so fitting for Alfonso's fate that Svevo originally wanted to use it as the title of his novel.³⁰

Copyists like Alfonso may be the quintessential incarnation of the office worker. Their work mainly consists of handwriting copies, an inherently unoriginal activity that is at the same time an inherently unique manifestation of the subject itself. In other words, it is a form of alienated labour that tends to disrupt any alienation between the worker and his work: a failure to copy documents adequately despite one's best efforts is almost automatically also a failure of the subject, and all the more so because the task does not require the subject to author anything original on his own. Even though Alfonso does not like his job and has never really wanted it in the first place, he actually does, at least to a certain extent, identify with it. His failure to copy is *not just* a failure of his tired hands; rather, his poor performance at work is seen as a symptom of a more general and more fundamental ineptitude, not only by his boss or colleagues, but eventually also by himself. At the same time, however, the work Alfonso – or any office worker – is supposed to be doing is always imposed upon him from the outside. Office workers by definition deal with institutional requirements and restraints; they always live up to or fall short of external expectations, and while every failure is perceived as the failure of the worker himself, success is never his own but the success of the company. The concept of being a failure is thus based on a peculiar relation between personal input and impersonal output, a specific form of subjectification that makes the worker invest more and more personal effort, that makes him get better at what he is doing, while only offering the prospect of not being socially negated as a reward.

30 Cf. Svevo, Italo: *Opera Omnia III: Racconti, Saggi, Pagine Sparse*. Ed. Maier, Bruno. Dall'Oglio: Milano 1968, p. 802. The word *inetto* shares its etymology with the English 'inapt'; both are derived from the Latin *in-aptus*.

Bartleby's Non-Functioning, Bartleby's Non-Failing

Alfonso Nitti, the unlucky accountant who would rather not copy, has a famous ancestor: Bartleby, the scrivener who “would prefer not to”.³¹ Herman Melville's short story was first published in 1853, some forty years before Svevo's *Una vita*, and prefigured, maybe even established a whole genre of literature centring on white-collar workers, office clerks, and small accountants that was to become popular in the decades to follow. Just like Alfonso, Bartleby works in finance (or, more precisely, at a law office on Wall Street), just like Alfonso he is a copyist – and just like Alfonso, he does not perform as expected. Over the course of the story, Bartleby simply ceases to write, explained only by the notorious formula he recites with a stoic politeness and “in a singularly mild, firm voice”,³² until he eventually ceases to do anything at all and starves to death. But while Alfonso's suicide acknowledges and reaffirms his being a failure, Bartleby's death seems to belong to a whole different order of resistance, one to which Alfonso never gains any access. Bartleby is not a failure in the sense that is discussed in this paper, a fact which is almost unnecessary to point out in light of his recent lionization by anti-capitalist groups.³³ At the same time, however, the story of Bartleby, who works under circumstances that are extremely similar to those of Alfonso, still articulates the modern idea of ‘being a failure’ – even more so, perhaps, by playfully disrupting it.

At the outset of the story, even before addressing the title character's arrival at the office and the strange events it brings, the lawyer, who serves as a first-person narrator, spends several paragraphs musing on the inadequacies and incapacities of his regular staff, thereby establishing the problem of his employees' functioning and functionality as one of the text's central concerns. Turkey, an elderly Englishman, is unable to work

31 Melville, Herman: “Bartleby, the Scrivener. A Story of Wall Street”. In: *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839–1860*. Ed. Hayford, Harrison / Macdougall, Alma / Tanselle, Thomas. Northwestern UP: Evanston, Chicago 1987, pp. 13–45. Bartleby recites his formula as many as seventeen times.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

33 Occupy Wall Street, for example, based many of their claims on Melville's short story, cf. Edelman, Lee: “Occupy Wall Street. ‘Bartleby’ against the Humanities”. *History of the Present* 3(1), 2013, pp. 99–118.

in the afternoon, as the lawyer points out using diction that is strikingly informed by discourses of thermodynamics and energy:

In the morning, one might say, his face was of a fine florid hue, but after twelve o'clock, meridian – his dinner hour – it blazed like a grate full of Christmas coals; [...] exactly when Turkey displayed his fullest beams from his red and radiant countenance, just then, too, at that critical moment, began the daily period when I considered his business capacities so seriously disturbed for the remainder of the twenty-four hours. [...] The difficulty was, he was apt to be altogether too energetic. There was a strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity about him. [...] [H]is face flamed with augmented blazonry, as if cannel coal had been heaped on anthracite.³⁴

While Turkey's performance cannot be trusted in the afternoon (a fact that is not unrelated to his wine consumption during lunch break, as the narrator later concedes), his ambitious younger colleague Nippers is being tormented by the opposite problem. Because of digestive issues he is unable to function properly in the mornings; unlike Turkey, he does not suffer from a "strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity" but rather from a complete lack of any (bowel) activity whatsoever. As neither of the two copyists is able to perform to the lawyer's full satisfaction and the uncopied documents keep piling up, the lawyer-narrator decides to hire a third³⁵ clerk: Bartleby, who, "[i]n answer to [an] advertisement", stands "upon the threshold of [his] office"³⁶ one morning and will not leave.

During his first few days at the office, Bartleby lives up to the lawyer's expectations, copying at an unmatched pace, unceasingly and tirelessly so:

At first, Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically.³⁷

34 Melville 1987a, p. 15.

35 In fact, there is a third employee from the beginning: Ginger Nut, a twelve-year-old who runs errands – and is not given any copying assignment.

36 Melville 1987a, p.15.

37 Ibid., p. 19.

This passage, the first one to describe Bartleby's performance at work, implicitly compares the three clerks to each other. As opposed to his colleagues, Bartleby seems to be functioning flawlessly, "mechanically" even, and as opposed to his colleagues he seems to be enjoying good health, displaying no symptoms of inebriety or digestive problems. Quite to the contrary: his new employee, who lives on a handful of ginger nuts a day and never leaves his desk to eat or sleep, "seemed to gorge himself on my documents", as the lawyer recalls in noticeable disbelief, "famishing for something to copy". As a figure of thirdness, Bartleby compensates Turkey's and Nippers' incapacities through his own efficiency; his "application" – a term that is often used in connection with devices or tools – is carried out without any human trace, but also, as the narrator states, without any hint of emotion or joy. Bartleby acts, quite literally, as a copying machine. In his writing, the difference between life and work and between man and machine is suspended; his whole life is subjected to the logic of mechanical function – he himself *has become* that very function.

It is no coincidence, then, that he works as a copyist, of all professions. While in Svevo's *Una vita*, the literary trope of copying is used to negotiate matters of originality and, more precisely, the complex tension between personal input and impersonal output that comes with being a clerk, Bartleby withdraws from the idea of the original (the opposite of imitation or duplication, and the very premise of copying) as such. It is only once mentioned in the story – in its most crucial moment: just when the lawyer asks his scrivener to "verify the accuracy of the copy, word by word",³⁸ making him compare his work to the original, Bartleby utters his famous formula for the first time. He might be copying with the utmost precision and efficiency, but, in accordance with his "application", he simply does not do anything else. He is so profoundly immersed in his self-sufficient activity, which is not based on anything and not aimed at anything either,³⁹ that the original needs to be omitted in order for him to perform.

This first "I would prefer not to" is followed by multiple other occasions in which Bartleby does not perform the tasks he is given – usually tasks

38 Ibid., p. 20.

39 Cf. Mainberger, Sabine: *Schriftskepsis. Von Philosophen, Mönchen, Buchhaltern, Kalligraphen*. Fink: München 1995, p. 192.

that go beyond sheer copying –, until he ceases to work altogether, without any further explanation. On a linguistic level, the machine-like nature of his failure is reflected by the intransitivity of his formula, which seems to constitute a refusal at first glance, but in fact suspends any grammatical or semantic reference, as Gilles Deleuze has pointed out:

It has been noted that the formula, I prefer not to, is neither an affirmation nor a negation. [...] The attorney would be relieved if Bartleby did not want to, but Bartleby does not refuse, he simply rejects a nonpreferred (the proofreading, the errands...). And he does not accept either, he does not affirm a presence that would consist in continuing to copy, he simply posits its impossibility. [...] [T]he formula that successively refuses every other act has already engulfed the act of copying, which it no longer even needs to refuse. The formula is devastating because it eliminates the preferable just as mercilessly as anything non-preferred. It not only abolishes the term it refers to, and that it rejects, but also abolishes the other term it seemed to preserve [...]. All particularity, all reference is abolished.⁴⁰

Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" turns out not to be a refusal or a preference, which would have indicated a personal affectedness or involvement. He does not prefer one thing over the other but omits the grammatical object which the transitive verb 'to prefer to' requires – he just prefers, intransitively. Bartleby, who seemed to be the epitome of a clerk who does what is expected from him in the beginning, now exhibits what it means to radically stay true to this demand. In the extent to which Bartleby is equivalent to his function, his failure is that of a function or a machine as well: as a copying machine that fails inexplicably (or so it seems), he exposes the intransitive logic of functioning behind the transitive logic of employed, dependent work.

In this sense, Bartleby's not *being* a failure is facilitated by his almost non-human demeanour – and, paradoxically, by the fact that he does indeed fail in the way a tool, a device, or a machine would. After Bartleby has uttered his "I would prefer not to" for the first time, the lawyer asks "You *will* not?"⁴¹ and Bartleby replies, in what Giorgio Agamben has

40 Deleuze, Gilles: "Bartleby; or, The Formula". In: *Essays Critical and Clinical*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis 1997, pp. 68–90, here p. 70–71. Deleuze's reading of *Bartleby* is based on Phillipe Jaworski's study on *Melville. Le désert et l'empire*. Presses de l'École Normale Supérieure: Paris 1986, esp. p. 19.

41 Melville 1987a, p. 35. Italics in the original.

described as an effort to “eliminate all traces of the word ‘will’”,⁴² and therefore all traces of desire, emotion, or transitive action: “I prefer not.” In his machine-like intransitivity, he cannot become affected by any sort of external expectation, or, for that matter, by the disappointment of not meeting it. It seems impossible to attribute any intrinsic quality or attitude to this pale, nondescript scrivener: no preference or refusal, and no individual incapacity or failure either.

Yet the lawyer-narrator is trying to do just that, in a desperate attempt to explain his employee’s startling behaviour. Asked about the reasons for his sudden non-copying, Bartleby says: “Do you not *see* the reason for yourself?”⁴³ The narrator thereupon concludes his scrivener might suffer from eye problems:

I looked steadfastly at him, and perceived that his eyes looked dull and glazed. Instantly it occurred to me, that his unexampled diligence in copying by his dim window for the first few weeks of his stay with me might have temporarily impaired his vision.⁴⁴

Bartleby does not comment on the lawyer’s hermeneutical short circuit or the bodily disfunction it alleges. When the narrator finally has to concede that his interpretation is as inaccurate as all the others he has already come up with before, he is left with one last default explanation: “Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like me to fathom.”⁴⁵ Bartleby’s monolithic formula is so unfathomable to the lawyer that not only do the events in his office start to slip out of his control, their interpretation does as well. At one point, he realizes that Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” has infiltrated the way he and his other clerks speak (“Somehow, of late I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word ‘prefer’ upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions”⁴⁶), yet at the same time, the formula

42 Agamben, Giorgio: “Bartleby, or on Contingency”. In: *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Ed. Heller-Roazen, Daniel. Stanford UP: Stanford 1999, pp. 243–271, here p. 254.

43 Melville 1987a, p. 32. Italics my own.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., p. 37.

46 Ibid., p. 31.

remains mysterious and indistinct to him and thus triggers a “congestion of signifiers”.⁴⁷ Bartleby’s failure to copy and the lawyer’s failure to understand its reasons eventually result in an even more fundamental semiotic failure that disrupts the relation between the signifier and the signified, voiding all conventional mechanisms of signification and compromising the lawyer’s ability to tell the story of what happened in his office as a consequence.

In this respect, it is ultimately the lawyer-narrator himself who is pushed to the brink of failure in the modern sense of the word, not only regarding the way he is dealing with Bartleby’s non-copying, but also and above all in the act of narrating as such. He is constantly struggling to find the right words to make sense of something that cannot be made sense of. And while in Svevo’s novel the story of Alfonso Nitti’s unremarkable life is being told, as the title *Una vita* already indicates, almost nothing is known about Bartleby’s biography. “While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life”, the narrator admits at the very beginning of the text, “of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no material exists for a full and satisfactory biography of this man.”⁴⁸ This confession underscores the most radical consequence of Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to”: impervious to any attribution or ascription, impervious even to any description, he undermines all attempts of a *biographiein*, all attempts to write his life and, therefore, all attempts to judge his life as well. As a figure of “universal suspension”,⁴⁹ Bartleby escapes all biographic paradigms of success and failure.

Yet while *Bartleby, the Scrivener* might not be a text that centres on its protagonist’s being a failure (quite the opposite, in fact), it certainly is a text that was written against the backdrop of mid-19th-century failure discourse in America – a discourse Melville was observing avidly, as another short prose piece of his shows. *The Happy Failure*, published one year after *Bartleby* in 1854, is a parable revolving around success and failure in

47 Matala de Mazza, Ethel: “Angestelltenverhältnisse. Sekretäre und ihre Literatur”. In: Siegert, Bernhard / Vogl, Joseph (eds.): *Europa. Kultur der Sekretäre*. diaphanes: Zürich, Berlin 2003, pp. 127–146, here p. 145. Translation my own.

48 Melville 1987a, p. 13.

49 Mainberger, p. 193.

life.⁵⁰ The first-person narrator, a teenage boy, joins his uncle to witness the debut of an invention the elderly man had been working on for the past ten years: the “Great Hydraulic-Hydrostatic Apparatus for draining swamps and marshes”.⁵¹ Through this machine, the uncle hopes to finally gain the “immortal renown” he has been striving for all of his life, maybe even “the glory denied to a Roman emperor. He tried to drain the Pontine marsh, but failed.”⁵² In order to prevent “some malignant spy [to] steal from me the fruits of ten long years of high-hearted, persevering endeavor”,⁵³ the uncle has his slave Yorpy and his teenage nephew ship the apparatus to a remote river island, where he wants to unveil his invention for the first time. But once the uncle tries to set the machine in motion, it does not work as expected: “Nothing could be more sure than that some anticipated effect had, as yet, failed to develop itself”, the first-person narrator states; “it was plain something or other was going wrong”.⁵⁴ They try again,

and as no perceptible effect yet followed, I was each moment looking for the previous command to tip the box over yet more, when, glancing at my uncle’s face, I started aghast. It seemed pinched, shriveled into mouldy whiteness, like a mildewed grape. I dropped the box, and sprang toward him just in time to prevent his fall.⁵⁵

Yet on their way back from the island, the narrator suddenly realises how “swiftly the current now swept us down” compared to “[h]ow hardly before [we had] striven to stem it”, while the uncle, devastated at first, eventually acknowledges he had been striving for the wrong thing all along (“Boy, take my advice, and never try to invent anything but – happiness”) and concludes: “I’m glad I’ve failed. I say, boy, failure has made a good old man of me.”⁵⁶

50 Melville, Herman: “The Happy Failure. A Story of the River Hudson”. In: *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839–1860*. Ed. Hayford, Harrison / Macdougall, Alma / Tanselle, Thomas. Northwestern UP: Evanston, Chicago 1987, pp. 245–261.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 255.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 256.

53 *Ibid.*

54 *Ibid.*, p. 259.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 260.

56 *Ibid.*

Melville's parable about a failing machine and failure in life condenses and continues one of the key themes of *Bartleby, the Scrivener*: the tension between ambition and the desire to renounce. For while Bartleby has mastered the art of renunciation in the most refined way, the lawyer-narrator himself, who is weirdly fascinated by his new scrivener's behaviour, seems to be secretly dreaming of doing the same thing. His law office is concerned with "rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds".⁵⁷ Therefore, he is surrounded by successful businessmen, the late John Jacob Astor being one of them, as he mentions several times, and although he does not want to "speak in vanity" about his relationship to his famous acquaintance, he does "love to repeat" his name, "for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it".⁵⁸ Right at the beginning of the text, he also complains about the abolition of the New York Court of Chancery at which he had held the office of a Master of Chancery: "It was not a very arduous office, but pleasantly remunerative."⁵⁹ He makes it very clear that he had "counted upon a life-lease of profits, whereas I only received those of a short few years".⁶⁰ At the same time, the lawyer introduces himself as "a man, who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with the profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best" and claims to be "one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause".⁶¹ While he is certainly "not insensible"⁶² to money and may even be eager to succeed, he cannot help but admire Bartleby's non-performance.

Being a failure in neoliberal societies

When we talk about somebody being a failure today, we do not think of copyists or scriveners, and probably not even of clerks or employees in general. Yet the idea of 'being a failure' is still very much connected to the concept of work – albeit to a concept of work that has changed

57 Melville 1987a, p. 14.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

and broadened over the last century, and within the last three decades especially. The German sociologist Ulrich Bröckling has identified what he calls a “hegemony of entrepreneurial subjectification”⁶³ in contemporary Western societies. Being an entrepreneur, he claims, has developed into far more than just a profession – rather, it is seen as a prerequisite for any kind of (social) success:

An entrepreneur is something we are supposed to become. The call to act as an entrepreneur of one’s own life produces a model for people to understand what they are and what they ought to be, and it tells them how to work on the self in order to become what they ought to be.⁶⁴

According to Bröckling, an entrepreneurial mindset is something we are set to strive for, regardless of our actual day jobs: As entrepreneurial subjects, we weigh every potential action in terms of revenue and expenses and ‘work’ every waking hour – on our careers first and foremost, but also on romantic relationships⁶⁵ and friendships, on health and appearance, on well-being and relaxation, on our very bodies.

The discursive shift from focusing on the “entrepreneur within the enterprise” to “presenting the individual *as* the enterprise”⁶⁶ can be traced back to the 1990s, when self-help books with titles such as *You & Co* or *Life Entrepreneur* propagated entrepreneurship as the only viable “attitude to life”.⁶⁷ It is no coincidence, then, that the 1990s also saw the individualization of the corporate ‘failure culture’ I described at the beginning of this paper. People who think like entrepreneurs have got to fail like them, too: nothing ventured, nothing gained, neither in business nor in life.

Contrary to what Silicon Valley start-up founders want to make us believe, though, in contemporary Western societies individual failure is rarely perceived as being connected to productivity or creativity, and it has little to do with the heroic fight against all odds which they claim to

63 Bröckling, Ulrich: *The Entrepreneurial Self. Fabricating a New Type of Subject*. Sage: London 2015, p. ix.

64 *Ibid.*, p. iix.

65 For a closer look on how love has become subject to capitalist ideas of success, see Illouz, Eva: *Cold Intimacies. The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Polity: Cambridge 2007.

66 Bröckling, p. 31.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

have fought. Instead, it is more often perceived as the banal but all the more existential kind of failure to which I dedicated the bigger part of my paper: as an underperformance, an underachievement, a non-functioning even in the most basic areas of life. This is mostly due to the very nature of today's broadened scope of 'work' and the notions of subjectification, in(transitivity), and ascription it carries: We work *on* our selves, our work is, similarly to that of Alfonso Nitti, an inherently unique manifestation of subjectivity, something we are inseparably intertwined with and defined by, yet something that is at the same time – in one way or the other – imposed upon us from the outside. Apart from just professional work, then, there are many other fields in which a person may fail – dating, or parenting, or ultimately also just living as such. More often than not, 'failing' today still implies 'not working properly', both in the early mechanistic sense of the expression and in the contemporary sense of modelling one's own self. And even though successful entrepreneurs like Zach Klein promise it will always be *it* that fails, not *us*, our contemporary conception of work suggests that we through our selves and in ourselves might be the ones who do not work or cannot work, the ones who *are failures*. While our idea of 'work' may have changed, our idea of *not working* has largely remained the same.

References

- Agamben, Giorgio: "Bartleby, or on Contingency". In: *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Ed. Heller-Roazen, Daniel. Stanford UP: Stanford 1999, pp. 243–271.
- Allen, Paul: "My Favorite Mistake. Paul Allen". *Newsweek*, 24.4.2011, retrieved 4.4.2020, from <https://www.newsweek.com/my-favorite-mistake-paul-allen-66489>.
- Backer, Georges de: *Dictionnaire de Proverbes François, avec l'Explication de leur Significations, et une partie de leur Origine*. George de Backer: Bruxelles 1710.
- Böckling, Ulrich: *The Entrepreneurial Self. Fabricating a New Type of Subject*. Sage: London 2015.

- Brombert, Victor: *In Praise of Antiheroes. Figures and Themes in Modern European Literature 1830–1980*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago 2001.
- Camerino, Giuseppe A.: *Italo Svevo e la crisi della Mitteleuropa. Edizione ampliata e completamente riveduta*. (Critica e letteratura 34). Liguori: Napoli 2002.
- Campbell Black, Henry: *A Treatise on the Law and Practice of Bankruptcy. Under the Act of Congress of 1898*. Vol. 1. Beard Books: Washington, D.C. 2000.
- Christensen, Tanner: “What it really means to fail”. *Creative Something*, 29.8.2013, retrieved 4.4.2020, from <https://creativesomething.net/post/59676599532/what-it-really-means-to-fail>.
- Deleuze, Gilles: “Bartleby; or, The Formula”. In: *Essays Critical and Clinical*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis 1997, pp. 68–90.
- Edelman, Lee: “Occupy Wall Street. ‘Bartleby’ against the Humanities”. *History of the Present* 3(1), 2013, pp. 99–118.
- Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm: *Deutsches Wörterbuch*. Vol. 25. Ed. Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften Berlin. dtv: München 1984.
- Illouz, Eva: *Cold Intimacies. The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Polity: Cambridge 2007.
- Jaworski, Phillipe: *Melville. Le désert et l’empire*. Presses de l’École Normale Supérieure: Paris 1986.
- Kracauer, Siegfried: *Die Angestellten. Aus dem neuesten Deutschland*. Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a. M. 1971.
- Mainberger, Sabine: *Schriftskepsis. Von Philosophen, Mönchen, Buchhaltern, Kalligraphen*. Fink: München 1995.
- Marx, Karl: *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Progress Publishers: Moscow 1974.
- Melville, Herman: “Bartleby, the Scrivener. A Story of Wall Street”. In: *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839–1860*. Ed. Hayford, Harrison / Macdougall, Alma / Tanselle, Thomas. Northwestern UP: Evanston, Chicago 1987, pp. 13–45.
- Melville, Herman: “The Happy Failure. A Story of the River Hudson”. In: *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839–1860*. Ed. Hayford, Harrison / Macdougall, Alma / Tanselle, Thomas. Northwestern UP: Evanston, Chicago 1987, pp. 245–261.

- Matala de Mazza, Ethel: "Angestelltenverhältnisse. Sekretäre und ihre Literatur". In: Siegert, Bernhard / Vogl, Joseph (eds.): *Europa. Kultur der Sekretäre*. diaphanes: Zürich, Berlin 2003, pp. 127–146.
- Micali, Simona: *Asceso e declino del "uomo di lusso". Il romanzo dell'intellettuale nell'Italia Nuova e i suoi modelli europei*. Le Monnier: Firenze 2008.
- Müller, Ingo: *A History of Thermodynamics. The Doctrine of Energy and Entropy*. Springer: Berlin 2007.
- Rothbard, Murray N.: *The Panic of 1819. Reactions and Policies*. Columbia UP: New York, London 1962.
- Rüstow, Caesar: *Die Kriegshandfeuerwaffen. Eine genaue Darstellung ihrer Einrichtung in den europäischen Armeen, ihrer Anfertigung, ihres Gebrauchs und ihrer allmäligen Entwicklung*. Vol. 2. Bath: Berlin 1864.
- Sandage, Scott. A.: *Born Losers. A History of Failure in America*. Harvard UP: Cambridge, London 2006.
- Schmitt, Arbogast: "Menschliches Fehlen und tragisches Scheitern. Zur Handlungsmotivation im Sophokleischen 'König Ödipus'". *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 131, 1988, pp. 8–30.
- Svevo, Italo: *Opera Omnia III: Racconti, Saggi, Pagine Sparse*. Ed. Maier, Bruno. Dall'Oglio: Milano 1968.
- Svevo, Italo: *Una vita*. In: *Opera Omnia II. Romanzi*. Ed. Maier, Bruno. Dall'Oglio: Milano 1969.
- Weber, Max: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Routledge: London, New York 2005.
- Webster, Noah: *Webster's Dictionary 1828. Online Edition*. Retrieved 4.4.2020, from <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/failure>.
- Weeks, Kathi: *The Problem with Work. Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwar Imaginaries*. Duke UP: Durham, London 2011
- Williams, Raymond: *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Oxford UP: Oxford, New York 2015.
- Wyllie, Irvin G.: *The Self-Made Men in America. The Myth of Rags to Riches*. Rutgers UP: New Brunswick 1954.