

Melvillian Meditations in Charles Johnson's "Executive Decision"

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ABSTRACT

Regardless of its philosophical para-text, an overt reading of Charles Johnson's short story "Executive Decision" suggests very obvious ideological connotations. The story displays the racial pride and black agency along with the ideologically loaded either-or antithesis of a competition between a white woman and a black man within a protracted job interview. At one point, the story even lapses into a sociological exposé. However, Johnson's intertextual pairing of the story with Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" significantly enhances its allusive potential, thereby redeeming the formulaic template of racial melodrama which Johnson frequently criticizes. By casting the African American character as a stand-in for Bartleby, the story opens up its narrow concern (affirmative action) to the larger theme of redistributive justice and the dangers of self-entitlement. In an eclectic reading, the story can even signify on the scarcity of positive male African American role models in the public eye, a theme which Johnson is very much preoccupied with.

KEYWORDS

tendentious art, autonomous art, formulaic writing, philosophical fiction, intertextuality, allusion, Charles Johnson, Herman Melville, Bartleby the Scrivener

The work of African American writer and scholar Charles Richard Johnson serves as an erudite commentary on the longstanding struggle between autonomous artistic self-expression and the ideological constraints in African American literature. His fiction spans many diverse themes, but the common denominator of virtually all his artistic endeavors is their philosophical focus, which he openly acknowledges. These leanings are easy to understand, given that Johnson the novelist also wears the hat of a (retired) professor of philosophy and the hat of a practicing Buddhist. Johnson identifies himself "first and foremost" as "a writer of philosophical fiction."¹ This can be readily understood as a direct encouragement to read his stories as dramatized philosophical treatises.

By dubbing his writing "philosophical fiction," Johnson to some degree pre-empts the interpretive endeavors of scholars probing his oeuvre. It may even be argued that this tendency to furnish his works of fiction with philosophical underpinnings amounts to conning readers into a blinkered interpretive perspective. Most of his novels and stories exude philosophical meaning in a subtle allusive manner, yet sometimes he chooses to hammer the point home by para-textual means. Our analysis will focus on one work in which para-textual reference deliberately coaxes us to read it as a narrative exercise in ethical philosophy, namely his short story "Executive Decision."

On a surface reading, Johnson's story "Executive Decision," the best known title from his 2005 collection *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories*, appears to be teeming with overt didacticism and formulaic typologies. It thus seems to undermine one of the tenets which Johnson has openly espoused as a scholar and teacher of creative writing, namely his distaste for formulaic, tendentious or overtly ideological writing. Having first honed his artistic skills as a young cartoonist during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s, he become somewhat inoculated against

1 Jim McWilliams, "An Interview with Charles Johnson," in *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, ed. Jim McWilliams (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 275. William R. Nash, "A Conversation with Charles Johnson," in McWilliams, *Passing the Three Gates*, 222.

politically engaged art. As a mature artist and thinker, he has repeatedly distanced himself from the tendency of some African American writing to lapse into formulaic and overtly ideological prose. This habit of subordinating artistic nuance to ideological content may even amount to what he calls “racial melodrama.”²

As a result of this apparent incongruity between Johnson’s disapproval of tendentious writing on the one hand and the overt tendentious bent of “Executive Decision” on the other, our analysis will consist of a brief inventory of its overtly ideological features, then seek to reassert Johnson’s artistic autonomy by alluding to their philosophical and intertextual connotations. These connotations will be seen as redeeming features which do not sit well with straight-laced tendentious prose.

“Executive Decision” is narrated by a head of a large legal firm who is about to hire a new chief executive as a replacement for a retiring CEO. The company is dynastic, and the narrator inherited it from his father thirty years ago, along with his secretary Gladys. After an exhausting ordeal, eight hundred managerial candidates have been narrowed down to two, a white woman and a black man.³ Each candidate has his or her relative strengths and weaknesses, ones that are difficult to admeasure in direct juxtaposition to each other. The white woman, Claire Bennett, comes from a relatively privileged background, having enjoyed the benefit of private tutors as a teenager, linguistically and culturally benefiting from her parents’ professional sojourns abroad, and excelling in college. At 28 years old, she has already proven her managerial aptitude by rising up to the position of assistant to the CEO in her previous company, which went under as a result of a legal suit.⁴ In addition to coming from the same northeastern part of the US and similarly privileged middle class background as the interviewers, she also impresses them as being very communicative and sociable.

The competing applicant, Eddie Childs, is the first college graduate from a large African American family from the Deep South. He almost immediately volunteers the information that his high-flying career ambitions were sparked off by a white teacher telling him that “he’d never be college material,”⁵ in a fairly overt intertextual allusion to Malcolm X’s *Autobiography*.⁶ Childs recounts this moment quite vividly (and rather too forcefully) at an early stage of the interview.

This sets the tone of the meeting. We learn that Childs worked as a night watchman to pay for college and sacrificed his social life. He then managed to build his own business and, before selling it off, he redeemed the mortgage on his parents’ house and “put one of his siblings through school.” This impressive record is accentuated by his membership in NAACP and active participation in community work preventing juvenile crime.

At this point in the interview, the fairly conventional narrative structure and delivery of Johnson’s story makes a sudden turn into a lecture in sociology. The new tone is introduced with reference to Childs’ wife Leslie, a primary school teacher, who “knew firsthand and through

2 Charles Johnson, *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 22.

3 Charles Johnson, “Executive Decision,” in *Dr. King’s Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 56.

4 Johnson, “Executive Decision,” 59–60.

5 Johnson, “Executive Decision,” 62.

6 Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, *The Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 149.

research about this country's marginalized history," namely "the contributions from people of color," and so did he, further emphasizing the lingering yet underserved low status of the African American community. The interviewers listen to his sociological detour in "respectful yet nervous silence."⁷ The volley of social depredations certainly strengthens the interviewee's credentials, as the narrator wonders how Eddie Childs could have survived, given that African American men "accounted for half those murdered in America." With these incredible hurdles to surmount, the narrator concludes, "you are amazed this man is even alive."⁸ This mediated monologue stretches over one page and a half, marking a clear watershed in Johnson's story. At this point, it seems that Childs or the narrator had to "swallow chalk"⁹ in order to pin the committee and the reader to the wall, even though this sociological intervention arguably puts the narratological coherence and plausibility of the story at risk.

Let us therefore pursue the narrative trajectory to its denouement prior to drawing any interpretive conclusions. The narrator and his two CEOs use Childs's complaint as an explanation for his rather guarded behavior throughout the interview, which culminates in his polite refusal to take a part in a poker game to which he is invited by one of the interviewers. This reserved and "opaque" manner makes narrator doubtful about Childs' chances of blending in with the work team.

Childs' main suggestion towards improving company strategies ensues from the statistical fact that minorities in the US will soon cease to be minorities. This argument cuts ice with Nips, one of the CEOs in charge of the interview, who is never satisfied with the way things are and seems to be looking forward to an upset of the status quo brought about by the "changing demographics." He therefore votes to select Childs.¹⁰ The other deputy CEO, whose fraternity nickname is Turk, endorses Claire Bennett as a steady and more predictable candidate. In addition to this, he adamantly opposes what he sees as preferential treatment of ethnic minorities, insisting that discrimination is a natural part of human experience.¹¹ It is therefore up to the narrator to "break the tie."

Too late to catch his commuter ferry, he decides to sleep on the decision in his office.¹² He is woken up by the sound of Gladys, his secretary who also used to be his father's "factotum and possibly his lover," unlocking the office door. Mildly embarrassed, the narrator sneaks into the adjacent room in order to get dressed, and watches Gladys going through her morning routine.¹³

In a 1993 interview with Johnson scholar Jonathan Little, Johnson points out that even in his short stories he frequently includes a moment of epiphany "where the character is smashed into a larger vision of life."¹⁴ Here the crucial moment arrives when the narrator watches his secretary in mufti, whistling Ellington's "Uptown Downbeat" and performing a few dance steps

7 Johnson, "Executive Decision," 63.

8 Johnson, "Executive Decision," 64.

9 Theodor Adorno uses this phrase in his classic treatment of the art-vs-politics dichotomy, taking Bertolt Brecht to task for his undiluted ideology in *Mother Courage and The Measures Taken*. Theodor Adorno, "Commitment to Art," in *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate within Marxism*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1977/2002), 187.

10 Johnson, "Executive Decision," 65.

11 Johnson, "Executive Decision," 67.

12 Johnson, "Executive Decision," 70.

13 Johnson, "Executive Decision," 72.

14 Little, "Interview," 226.

in a rare unguarded moment, and realizes that she is in fact an African American woman who has been passing for white for all these years. It is only now that we (along with the narrator) finally understand her reticence and reluctance to discuss the company's racial policies. Still slightly awed by the discovery, the narrator asks her to weigh in on the choice he is about to make. She says that Eddie Childs reminds her of Turk when he was applying for the job a long time ago, and implicitly reminds the narrator that even Turk was a beneficiary of preferential treatment back then. "Your father never approved of Mr. Turk. His references weren't that good," she recalls, "but he got the job because he was your friend and you insisted. You acted on his behalf, and that was all right."¹⁵

The final denouement scene therefore alerts the narrator to the fact that Gladys has found it necessary to pass all these years, thereby implicitly suggesting that being black is still deemed a stigmatizing disadvantage at a corporate workplace. In addition to this, Gladys's reminder also alerts the narrator to the fact that he already committed the "injustice" of preferential treatment once, thereby creating a precedent, and the correctness of his decision has been validated in retrospect. Through these two revelations, one unwitting and the other deliberate, the narrator's inherited factotum manages to break the tie for him.

Intertextual Significations and Philosophical Leanings

As the nicknames of the narrator's associates clearly indicate, "Executive Decision" quite ostentatiously flaunts its intertextual engagement with Herman Melville's canonical short story "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853). The deputies' nicknames (Nippers/Nips and Turk) and their matching character traits (Turk being more irritable in the afternoon and Nips in the morning, along with other idiosyncrasies) are accompanied by many other allusive elements. The story borrows the motif of hiring and firing in a large legal firm, the boss-as-narrator as well as a number of his legalistic mannerisms, the unpleasant and nerve-wrecking decision that the narrator has to make, the theme of sleeping at one's workplace, and many other minor and seemingly ornamental items, such as the bust of Cicero in the narrator's office. The story does not take place in a Wall Street office, "entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations,"¹⁶ as in Melville's text, but in a somewhat more pleasant office building in Seattle which is, however, seemingly devoid of human presence between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m., i.e. during a large portion of the story.

Bartleby's pivotal role seems to have been split between two African American characters in "Executive Decision," namely the successful applicant Eddie Childs and Gladys, the long-serving secretary. Johnson commuted Bartleby's complaint and social reserve to Eddie Childs, making him even utter the epitomic "I would prefer not to" phrase when declining Turk's invitation to his home for a game of poker.¹⁷ This also has a direct parallel in Melville's story. Shortly before the eviction, the lawyer rather desperately assumes his "kindest tone" and invites Bartleby to "go home with [him] now." To this, Bartleby gives a slightly less resolute answer than usual, namely "at present I

¹⁵ Johnson, "Executive Decision," 74.

¹⁶ Herman Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener," *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 1, ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York: Norton and Company, 1994), 2251.

¹⁷ Johnson, "Executive Decision," 65.

would prefer not to make any change at all."¹⁸ Gladys is referred to as a factotum, a term which is not found in Melville's story but used in classic scholarly probes into *Bartleby's* personality.¹⁹ In addition, Gladys is also a socially reticent person and shares one more specific trait with *Bartleby*, namely his unwillingness to go out with his colleagues, typically for lunch.

Let us briefly review some major philosophical and intertextual aspects of the Melville/Johnson pairing, beginning with a reference to William Gleason's article published in 2009.

The overtly placed philosophical concepts in "Executive Decision" can be directly outlined by two quotes, one of which is para-textual. The story is previewed by an epigraphic summary of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, prodding you to act "as if the principle of thy action were to become by thy will a universal law of nature."²⁰

Added to this, when musing about his college years at Harvard in the sixties, the narrator remembers the oratorical injunction by Martin Luther King, Jr. that "[p]ower at best is love implementing the elements of justice" while "justice at best is love correcting everything that stands against love," a piece of advice that kept "echoing in [the] ears" of the narrator even after assuming the responsibility as a head of a company.²¹ These two quotes seem to provide the basic philosophical and ethical framing of the story.

William Gleason perceives Johnson's intertextual engagement with "*Bartleby*" as a contrast between the affirmative action enacted in the "Executive Decision" and the "affirmative *in*action" of Melville's scrivener.²² Moreover, he reads the main value of Johnson's update of "*Bartleby*" in the narrator's "refusal to *copy*" the "traditional hiring patterns of the company," a decision which does not lead to "immobility and death," as it does in "*Bartleby the Scrivener*," but rather fosters "integration and renewal."²³

In addition to this general antithesis, Gleason focuses on the philosophical nature of the conundrum that the main character is required to face. Gleason reminds us that Turk's argument that they "may hire or fire the most qualified employee ... for bad reason, good reason, or no reason at all,"²⁴ refers to legal scholar Richard Epstein, namely his book *Forbidden Grounds: The Case Against Employment Discrimination Laws* (1992). Epstein's central argument, which sparked controversy, resides in his critique of the "unjustified limitation" brought on by affirmative action as curtailing the freedom of private enterprises to "do business with whomever they please." This is Turk's way of qualifying his preference for Claire Bennett. Nips counters this by reminding him of a college course taught by John Rawls which they once attended and whose basic message could be boiled down to the communal statement that people share their fates and should act accordingly. Gleason summarizes the difference between the two positions in the statement that, unlike Epstein, John

18 Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener," 2255.

19 David Morse, *American Romanticism: From Melville to James - The Enduring Excessive* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1987), 75.

20 Johnson, "Executive Decision," 55.

21 Johnson, "Executive Decision," 57.

22 William Gleason, "It Falls to You: Rawls *Bartleby* and the Ethics of Affirmative Action in Charles Johnson's "Executive Decision," in *African American Culture and Legal Discourse*, eds. Lovaerie King and Richard Schur (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 76; emphasis in original.

23 Gleason, "It Falls to You," 86; emphasis added. Note: This text uses italics to emphasize linguistic affinity between the two short stories (Melville, Johnson) and sporadically also other referenced texts (Parenti).

24 Johnson, "Executive Decision," 67.

Rawls does not see the pursuit of civil liberties, human freedoms and happiness as an “exclusively private goal” but a social obligation based on mutual interdependence.²⁵

To elaborate on Gleason’s sketchy description we need to synopsise the argument in Johnson’s original discursive rendering. Nips singles out one of John Rawls’s points as a rebuke for Turk’s unyielding attitude, reminding him that “when justice is seen as fairness, men of equal circumstances agree to share one another’s fate.” Further reiterating the lecturer’s point, Nips argues that wealth, beauty and talent are arbitrarily distributed, which in itself constitutes unfairness. To see justice done, he continues, the more fortunate have every responsibility “to eradicate these inequities,” otherwise the less fortunate “have every right to break the social contract” which seems lopsided against them. Nips does not present this as an altruistic argument, as he concludes that unless the least favored are induced towards cooperation, “the social order collapses for everyone.” Nips eventually applies this explicitly to African American population, suggesting that he and Turk, as the favored part of population, are obliged to “redress the wrongs caused by slavery and a century of segregation.” Such compensational reasoning triggers an incredulous reaction from Turk.

“Wronged by whom? Nips, I assure you I had nothing to do with it. All that happened before our time!”

“Then we have no greater social obligations?”

“My dear friend,” Turk said, patting Nips on his knee, “making the monthly payroll on time so employees and their families are not unduly inconvenienced is ... social obligation enough. I am for that candidate who puts *that* first.”²⁶

In view of these conflicting sets of values, Gleason concedes that Johnson may have indeed used this piece of short fiction as explicit leverage towards “the appropriateness of affirmative action as a workplace remedy against employment discrimination,” yet he managed to transcend the usual blinkered polemicism by emphasizing the all-embracing responsibility that people in a “just society” should be mindful of with regard to “the Bartlebys,” that is, “the least fortunate ... among them.”²⁷ And this is the principle that the narrator eventually seems to elevate to the universalist Kantian dictum which epigraphically ushers in the story.

Contextual Browbeating and Rogue Readings

In the context of *Dr. King’s Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories* (2005), the artistic merit and intent of “Executive Decision” can be admeasured against other items within the collection, which may generate somewhat different readings than it would within the collection in which the story originally came out. “Executive Decision” had already been first published in 1997 in *Outside the Law: Narratives on Justice in America*, which its two editors Susan Richards Shreve and Porter Shreve (a mother and a daughter) conceived as a thematic collection of essayistic and literary reflections on the US legal system. In a preface to this book, Porter Shreve makes it clear that the editorial intention was to gently pit justice against the law (in alignment with Kant’s categorical

²⁵ Gleason, “It Falls to You,” 79.

²⁶ Johnson, “Executive Decision,” 69–70; emphasis in original.

²⁷ Gleason, “It Falls to You,” 75.

imperative in Johnson's tale). And indeed, as the essays and stories were being considered and Shreve pondered on the relevance of each to the assigned theme, the editorial presupposition turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. "If there was one thing everyone seemed to be saying, it was this: Justice is outside the law," she concludes.²⁸

This ideological tilt is confirmed by Johnson, who claims he wrote the story in order to re-examine his own attitude to affirmative action.²⁹ Consequently, if a reader opens up *Outside the Law* to page 75 and starts reading Johnson's story, s/he is already pre-emptively influenced by the explicit editorial para-text and by Kant's succinct epigraph which previews the story. Such con-textualizing, which hammers home that *this is a story about legalistic and intuitive justice*, outstrips even Johnson's usual proactive philosophical caveats. When critically appraised, both of these devices in effect invite dissenting or rogue readings which squirm out of this interpretive straitjacket and read against the grain. Through the combined con-textual impact of the *Outside the Law* preface, Kant's epigraph and Johnson's admission that by writing the story he was trying to get his head around affirmative action, the reader is being browbeaten into reading "Executive Decision" simply as a story which examines the fuzzy line between justice and law. While this prescriptive prism may still allow enough interpretive wiggle room, it must be seen as *prima facie* tendentious, as the readers are manipulated into a certain ideological perspective. By this token, any dissenting reading of the story should be regarded as non-tendentious, even though it may follow an eclectic and narrow interpretive path. Let us therefore take a look at some such eclectic readings.

In order to appreciate the relevance and ingenuity of Johnson's intertextual engagement, we first need to narrow down our focus and examine some other aspects of Melville's source story that may have appealed to Johnson. "Bartleby the Scrivener" seems as enigmatic to its exegetes as Bartleby himself is to the lawyer who has hired him. The story tends to generate vastly different interpretive positions which seem to defy consensus in the same way Bartleby keeps defying Melville's narrator. The interpretive positions which most obviously resonate with Johnson's update are, not surprisingly, left-leaning readings of Melville offered by David Kuebrich, Michael Gilmore and Raymond Williams, which rely heavily on historical context and class analysis. Since there is a significant overlap between these three analyses, we shall use David Kuebrich's article as the epitomical point of reference.

Kuebrich places the creation of Melville's story within the context of the working class demonstrations that seized New York in the middle of the 19th century. He emphasizes the strength of the nascent worker resistance, triggered by the gradual displacement of artisanship by factory production. The laborers' critique of the system was based on a synthesis of Christianity and socialism, summarized in Horace Greeley's *Hints towards Reforms*, a compilation of newspaper articles and speeches.³⁰ Greeley took particular exception to the notion that somebody's poverty should be seen as evidence of his or her depravity, and regularly criticized Christians for being

28 Porter Shreve, "Preface," in *Outside the Law: Narratives on Justice in America*, eds. Susan Richards Shreve and Porter Shreve (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), viii.

29 Nash, "Conversation," 222.

30 David Kuebrich, "Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in 'Bartleby,'" *New England Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (1996): 381-383.

oblivious to flagrant social injustices.³¹ The historical record indicates that Herman Melville read Greeley's articles on a regular basis and even bought *Hints toward Reforms* immediately upon its publication in 1850,³² less than three years before he completed "Bartleby."

Teasing out his own conclusions from this research, Kuebrich is not fooled by the fact that the upper middle class lawyer who monopolizes the narrative voice in "Bartleby" presents himself as a benevolent boss who overlooks the shortcomings of his erratic employees and later reasons fairly patiently with his newly hired and perversely uncooperative copyist. In opposition to this self-presentation, Kuebrich sees the lawyer as a character who has been hoodwinked by dominant ideological assumptions of his time, thereby inevitably sliding into an unreliable narrator. His ideologically-tinted glasses prevent him from seeing the presumed misbehavior of his employees through to its source, namely the dictatorial and stereotypical workplace without any prospect of professional advancement and decent salary. The narrator sees himself as a vastly superior personage and a generous provider of work, thereby wincing at Nippers' attempts to improve his professional portfolio (and financial status) outside of his official contract. The narrator attributes these attempts to Nippers' "diseased ambition" and dismisses his clients as "ambiguous-looking fellows in seedy coats."³³ If we thought of Melville's lawyer as a real historical figure, his ideological assumptions would have been inculcated in him by the likes of James Bennett, Greeley's main opponent, who claimed that poverty was the result of human decrepitude and a lack of "persevering industry,"³⁴ phrasing it in such a way as to legitimate the increasing social inequality and class privilege. On the other hand, Bartleby's refusal to work (as well as the frustrations of the other clerks) is better understood as a response to the impersonal, unequal and exploitative working conditions that continued to trigger organized working-class resistance.³⁵ The conflict between the lawyer and his copyist thus subliminally "copies" the conflicting positions of Bennett and Greeley. Claire Bennett's surname in Johnson's story thus may even be a very nuanced allusion to her 19th century namesake James Bennett, as she prides herself on having mitigated the damage ensuing from a "class-action suit" filed against her previous company.³⁶

If we emphasize this classist theme in the interpretive pairing of Melville's "Bartleby" and Johnson's "Executive Decision," we must inevitably attribute a different significance to the Rawls/Epstein dichotomy used by Johnson. In his dismissal of affirmative action, Epstein argues that such preferential treatment is in blatant denial of "the basic doctrine of employment as it developed during the 19th century," as pointed out by Gleason.³⁷ However, if we take a close look at Epstein's arguments in his excursion into the common law as it developed throughout the 19th century in the US, we realize that his views involuntarily court those expressed much more bluntly in Melville's

31 John Nichols, *The "S" Word: A Short History of an American Tradition... Socialism* (London: Verso, 2011), 66–68. Adam Tuchinsky, *Horace Greeley's New-York Tribune: Civil War-era Socialism and the Crisis of Free Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 151–152.

32 Merton Sealts, *Melville's Reading* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 88. Quoted in Kuebrich, "Melville's Doctrine," 381.

33 Melville, "Bartleby," 2237.

34 Kuebrich, "Melville's Doctrine," 382.

35 Kuebrich, "Melville's Doctrine," 386.

36 Johnson, "Executive Decision," 60.

37 Gleason, "It Falls to You," 78.

mid-19th century by James Bennett by way of endorsing Lockean prioritization of private property over social solidarity.

Epstein bases this laissez faire argument on the conviction that the bleak Hobbesian view of the world as "a war of all against all" only accounts for small portion of humanity, and the social depredations of excessive self-interest are therefore "surely overdrawn as a universal portrait."³⁸ Epstein's treatise displays a more nuanced grasp of the ethical conundrum than this sketchy characterization suggests. And yet the quoted argument, in a somewhat cruder form, was used in Melville's time as a logical steppingstone towards the endorsement of ideologically unhindered free market in which everybody could compete and sell their labor with limited legislative and executive interference. And it is precisely this notion of an even-handed free market that gave people like James Bennett and characters like Bartleby's boss their sense of entitlement. This sense of entitlement, involuntarily endorsed by Epstein, finds both realistic and symbolic expressions in the two stories.

Bartleby the Squatter and Cicero the Slumlord

One of the insignia from Melville's story that Johnson quite literally retains is the "plaster-of-Paris bust of Cicero" in the narrator's spacious office.³⁹ The bust makes sense for an office of an attorney in its representation of an ancient master rhetorician and lawyer, yet when we perceive it through a very deliberately selected ideological prism, it may also exude rather different symbolism.

Even without access to any publishing statistics, it is easy to agree with Gleason's speculation that a vast majority of Johnson's admirers became acquainted with the "Executive Decision" within the *Dr. King's Refrigerator* collection which came out in 2005, not within the original legalistic anthology in 1997. Once we have severed the story from the original editorial plan, we may also experimentally relegate Johnson's authorial intentions to the background and playfully pair the story up in an intertextual relationship with Michael Parenti's controversial yet critically acclaimed book *The Assassination of Julius Caesar: The People's History of Ancient Rome*, published two years before *Dr. King's Refrigerator*.⁴⁰

In his revisionist treatise, Parenti undermines the standard exegetical paradigm of the late republic in Rome. He does not regard the assassination of Julius Caesar as a response of democratic patrician forces against a wanton tyrant, but as an aggressive response of senatorial oligarchy against a populist emperor who had been cutting into their privilege by pursuing mildly redistributive and egalitarian policies. Cicero, who had risen through the ranks of senatorial oligarchy, had much to lose from the incursions of populist rulers like Caesar. In Parenti's rendering, Cicero was a profiteer

38 Richard A. Epstein, *Forbidden Grounds: The Case Against Employment Discrimination Laws* (Boston: Harvard, 1992), 24.

39 Johnson, "Executive Decision," 58.

40 Parenti's revisionist book certainly presents a very shocking portrayal of late Roman Republic, which goes directly against the mainstream historical iconography of that era, particularly by inverting the tyrant/democrat dichotomy which has been used as the standard explanation of the antagonism between Caesar and Brutus, e.g. as enshrined by Shakespeare. The Yale-educated political scientist Parenti makes no effort to disguise his own Marxist tilt, yet the book was nominated for Pulitzer Prize in 2003 and has encountered fairly little scholarly opposition so far.

from slave labor and owner of slum tenements in the “downtown” of Rome,⁴¹ and had repeatedly denounced laws with any egalitarian inklings, for example the “law that granted freedmen the right to vote along with their former masters” or “the secret ballot.”⁴² In Parenti’s own summary, Cicero was slumlord who “deplored even the palest moves toward democracy.” Cicero’s description of Roman commoners as mediated by Parenti is eerily reminiscent of James Bennett’s rhetoric. Both Cicero and Bennett saw penury as the result of moral decrepitude, dismissing even slightly more fortunate lower classes as “artisans and shopkeepers and that kind of scum.”⁴³

Incidentally, Cicero could also be called the ultimate “scrivener” of his age. Invoking John Gager’s criticism of biased historical “paradigms created many centuries ago,” Parenti points out that “gentlemen chroniclers” like Cicero have historically exercised a de facto monopoly on the portrayal and interpretation of the times they lived in, thereby effectively blotting out any semblance of popular sentiment or working class perspective.⁴⁴

With this unflattering interpretive take on Cicero, the prominent presence of his white bust in the office of Melville’s white solicitor and Johnson’s white inheritor may easily solicit a host of different associations, some of which pertain to Johnson’s recurrent themes. The image of the penurious squatter Bartleby falling asleep under the watchful gaze of Cicero the slumlord perhaps smacks of cheap emotional blackmail, yet the pairing also offers more nuanced symbolic meanings. In view of Cicero’s alleged monopoly on written historical records from his era, one that virtually blots out different perspectives, the interpretive pairing of Childs and Bartleby provides even more elaborate allusive significations.

Melville’s narrator calls scriveners “a somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet *nothing* that I know of has ever been written.”⁴⁵ In an act a deft Manichean inversion, Johnson commutes some characteristics of the pallid and reclusive Bartleby to Childs, who epitomizes black social uplift. By associative progression, we may arrive at the conclusion that Melville’s narrator’s pluralistic use of *scriveners* in his reminiscence may be a generic equivalent of *African Americans* in Johnson’s story. This is also supported by the narrator’s reference to Gladys’s reclusive Bartlebyan manners, dictated by her racial passing, and the accentuated subordinate position of African Americans within the company. In fact, as the narrator is making his final choice late at night, he intimates to us that the only other person who is still working at ten p.m. is an African American janitor.⁴⁶ This late night drudgery should be coupled with the fact that Gladys is generally described as the first person to arrive and the last person to leave, and the narrator explicitly labels her as the “factotum” of his father, the previous owner of the firm. The information can be seen as a calculated authorial nod to the low-profile indispensability of African Americans in the social texture of the United States past and present, a theme repeatedly broached by Johnson. The low-profile diligence and ubiquity

41 Michael Parenti, *The Assassination Of Julius Caesar: A People’s History Of Ancient Rome* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 28.

42 Parenti, *The Assassination Of Julius Caesar: A People’s History Of Ancient Rome*, 87.

43 Parenti, *The Assassination Of Julius Caesar: A People’s History Of Ancient Rome*, 87.

44 Parenti, *The Assassination Of Julius Caesar: A People’s History Of Ancient Rome*, 18.

45 Melville, “Bartleby,” 2234.

46 Johnson, “Executive Decision,” 57.

of Johnson's African American employees is in turn loosely analogical to the mundane drudgery of Melville's scribes and the ubiquity of Bartleby on the company's premises.

Let us therefore experimentally juxtapose Melville's musings on the invisibility of scribes (i.e. formulaic writers) to Johnson's reminiscence about the invisibility of African American literary achievements well beyond the middle of the 20th century. "In the universe of American education," laments Johnson, "works by black authors were 'dark matter,' *invisible* to the eye and *unknown*."⁴⁷

Perhaps even more poignantly, Melville's narrator previews his story by singling out an exceptional feature of Bartleby as a one-of-a-kind scribe whose uniqueness has, sadly, gone unrecorded. "While of other law copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done," the narrator relates, seemingly anxious that "no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man," which he sees as "an irreparable loss to literature."⁴⁸

Keeping in mind Johnson's conflation of Childs with Bartleby, let us compare the above passage to a conglomerate of two Johnson's complaints that there are not enough African American male role models in the public eye.

As an artist and a father, I am filled with... anger because I know my own son, now approaching his twenty first birthday... must negotiate [his] way through an uncivil public space soured by the steady bombardment of media images that portray black people in the worst imaginable ways.⁴⁹ Why are there no stories about the late astronaut Ron McNair [or] Colin Powell? The expansion of our images and the stories we tell is important because there is so much of the human experience that is never told.⁵⁰

In contrast to this invisibility of positive male role models to *subscribe* to, Childs is virtually an epitome of virtues that refute these slanderous images. While the austerity of Melville's Bartleby does not have any explicitly articulated origin, Eddie Childs, if cast against Johnson's often mentioned artistic and personal preoccupations, stands for the "importance of delayed gratification" that should be taught to young black children by way of prepping them for their relatively disadvantaged position within the "workings of capitalist economy."⁵¹

This visibility/invisibility dichotomy may also be related to the discrepancy between visible and invisible victimization in the two stories. The only palpable reason for Bartleby's forlornness as conjectured by Melville's narrator is his previous employment in the Dead Letter Office. Given the statistically anchored drawbacks that plague the African American community, baldly revealed in Johnson's story, it is easy to conclude that Bartleby is a tragic hero without a cause in comparison with the historically hindered Eddie Childs.

47 Charles Johnson, "Afterword," in *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, eds. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 232.

48 Melville, "Bartleby," 2234.

49 Charles Johnson, "The Second Front: A Reflection on Milk Bottles, Male Elders, the Enemy Within, Bar Mitzvahs, and Martin Luther King Jr.," 177.

50 Beth Grub, "A Man of His Word," in *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, ed. Jim McWilliams (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 206–213; emphasis added.

51 Charles Johnson, "The Second Front: A Reflection on Milk Bottles, Male Elders, the Enemy Within, Bar Mitzvahs, and Martin Luther King Jr.," in *Black Men Speak*, eds. Charles Johnson and John McCluskey, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 183.

Remarks in Closing: Compensatory Intertextuality

Kuebrich reads the narrator of Melville's story as a fairly well-meaning man who is nevertheless hopelessly caught up in the capitalistic dialectic and cannot see that his top-down directorial manners are grating on Nippers and Turk, and eventually trigger the defiant attitude of Bartleby. Even after this confrontation, Melville's narrator is not "smashed into a larger vision of life under the pressure of events,"⁵² to complete Johnson's definition of epiphany. Until the very end of the story, he thinks of Bartleby's position as perverse and anomalous, is surprised at his open antagonism, and even tries to ascribe Bartleby's negativistic attitude to his previous employment in the dead-letter office. By emphasizing these other circumstances, he is unwittingly diverting our attention from the inherent flaws of the capitalist system, while also letting his own managerial peremptoriness off the hook.

In contrast, Johnson's head lawyer is not completely blind to social inequities. As has already been hinted at, he was active in the civil rights movement as a college student, and his awareness of social imbalances occasionally surfaces throughout the story, even though the silver spoon in his mouth has clearly taken its due. He muses about the lingering systemic under-privilege of the company's African American employees, namely their conspicuous absence in the firm's administrative wing.⁵³ This attests to the fact that, while the inequity impinges on his conscience, it is not enough to convince him to change the situation. He therefore starts his imaginative journey from a less ideologically entrenched position than does Melville's narrator, an advantage that is capitalized on at the end of the story. Johnson allusively redeems the hoodwinked capitalist in Melville's *Bartleby* by making him empathetically reach out in what seems to be an earnest attempt to level the field. Through his executive decision, the administrative wing of the company has been diversified.

In her review of "Executive Decision," African American writer ZZ Packer complains that the issues in the story "aren't brought to life."⁵⁴ This apparent listlessness makes perfect sense when paired up with "*Bartleby*," because Melville's story does the exact opposite. Melville manages to make us emotionally invested precisely because the reason of Bartleby's enfolding tragedy does not explicitly reveal itself. Johnson, on the other hand, (perhaps deliberately) puts us off by dragging Childs's grievances into open light. In so doing, he enables the legalistic mind of the narrator to adjudicate the case in a more redistributive and democratic manner, and subsequently make the correct *executive* decision, unlike Melville's boss whose ideological capitalist indoctrination in effect helps *execute* Bartleby in punishment for his *pale* move toward democracy.

Melville's nameless narrator laments that the outstanding nature of Bartleby has not left a mark, has not been recorded in writing, even though he eventually ousts him from his company. Johnson's nameless narrator in "Executive Order" makes sure that the outstanding character of Eddie Childs leaves an imprint on his company.

52 Little, "Interview," 226.

53 Johnson, "Executive Decision," 58; emphasis added.

54 ZZ Packer, "Dr. King's Refrigerator: Thinking Outside the Icebox," *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, March 3, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/06/books/review/dr-kings-refrigerator-thinking-outside-the-icebox.html?_r=4.

In light of this class analysis, even the fact that the self-made Childs is to be hired as a replacement for Turk (the narrator's erstwhile protégé) attains special significance with regard to the democratic and socially redistributive appeal of the story, thus providing yet one more riposte to the elitist framing of Melville's "Bartleby."

Despite appearances, "Executive Decision" does not belie Johnson's non-partisan creed, even though it was commissioned as a semi-legalistic assignment. A perfunctory reading of the story indicates very pronounced ideological leanings which smack of racially invested formulaic writing that Johnson dismissively calls "racial melodrama." And yet, despite these tropes and typologies, the complementary intertextual engagement of Johnson's story with "Bartleby the Scrivener" redeems its overt formulaic nature. The story is clearly pitched as a meditation on the limits of Kant's categorical imperative when contrasted with a morally dilemmatic and seemingly irresolvable conundrum. However, even if we refuse to be guided by this contextual pitch, thus respectfully relegating the philosophical overtones of the story to the background, we are still left with a very rich and ambiguous texture of allusions lurking behind the formulaic facade.

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