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To the Dissertation Defense Committee of Tereza Stejskalová  
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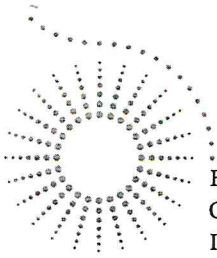
Supervisor's Report on a doctoral thesis authored by

Ms. Tereza Stejskalová, MA entitled

**“Bartleby, the Scrivener’ in Contemporary Culture” (2017)**

Tereza Stejskalová evaluates in her doctoral thesis, from multiple vantage points, the remarkable cultural phenomenon of Herman Melville's 1853 text, “Bartleby, the Scrivener”. As she claims in her abstract, her dissertation text assesses the Bartleby Industry, and it offers a survey view of how the story has been appropriated by adjacent disciplines “such as art and philosophy” (5) to wrestle with “politics and ethics” (5). Thereby, her work attempts to test “the legitimacy of philosophical readings of literature” (5). A special emphasis is placed on recent critical interventions in the past twenty-five years of “Bartleby” by Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, and Slavoj Žižek. The thesis text contains in total approximately 47,905 words. The contents include Abstract, Introduction, five composite chapters that form the body of the work, Conclusion, Bibliography and Summary.

The candidate opens her introduction with an account of how the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York City in Autumn 2011 found “its unofficial mascot” (8) in Bartleby Melville's scrivener, and also continues to describe the role that the short story had in 2013 in political events in Istanbul, Turkey (9). In an interesting account of the artist collective Claire Fontaine, we read that this cultural entity includes English artist James Thornhill and Italian philosopher Fulvia Carnevale; the collective owes an intellectual debt to Michel Foucault and to Giorgio Agamben in addition to Italian feminism of the 1970s and 80s; in Claire Fontaine's evocation human strike “names” as the candidate puts it, “a movement of desubjectification, it is a strike against oneself, an exit from one's identity (of a good mother, diligent worker, loving wife, active citizen) and all that sustains it. Bartleby is its chief personification” (12-13). In this interpretive light, “Bartleby has become a symbol of resistance for artists and activists” (15). Crucially, the candidate asks: “How do non-literary readings make literary history newly relevant? How do they challenge the singularity of a literary text? The first chapter owes an intellectual debt to Shoshana Felman's psychoanalytic orientation. Chapter two offers a survey view of the circulation of Bartleby in contemporary thought and culture. Chapters three, four, and five highlight the powerfully influential readings given to the Bartleby text by the philosophers Deleuze, Agamben, and Žižek respectively. The candidate closes her introduction with the self-reflexive point about Melville's tale, namely that “it will



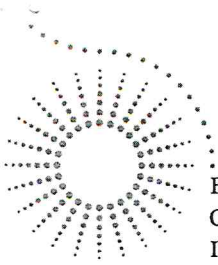
turn out that the self-destructiveness and utter solitariness of Bartleby will trouble any reading of 'Bartleby' that makes use of it as a paradigm of a collective political strategy" (17).

In Chapter Two we read that for the candidate's target thinkers, which in this context also includes Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri: "'Bartleby' stands as a relevant figure on which to model a new, radical politics for the new era" (31). Chapter Three compares "Bartleby" with other texts such as the short stories of Kafka or Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which it shares a quality that it "hide[s] an insoluble mystery" (36). The handling of her major figures and their engagement of Bartleby is both astute and critically just. The candidate's conclusion includes a discussion of her main theorists with such contentions as the following: with regard to Žižek's example, "Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to,' enacts the radical negativity of subjectivity and is the expression of the unconscious drive. Through its reluctance to engage in any way with the social reality, its preference for the negative that remains independent of the ruling ideology and the opposition that feeds off it, it reveals the socio-political organization of reality in its contingency. It thus forms a basis for any emancipatory politics" (117-118). With respect to Agamben she puts an accent on the idea that, "At stake is Bartleby's reluctance to actualize his potential (to write, to respond, to leave), his refusal to leave the sphere of impotentiality—i.e. that which prevents potentiality to turn into actuality" (118). The candidate then links up Bartleby to Deleuze's idea (which Deleuze pioneered with Félix Guattari) of 'minor literature' as "The theoretical framework (of deterritorialized language, inherently collective and political nature of minor literature, its anticipation of a future community) applied originally to Kafka's oeuvre is the philosophical background of Deleuze's reading" (119) which has indeed been highly influential. The candidate claims that "Deleuze reads Bartleby as a revolutionary figure, a messiah announcing a new society of anarchist individuals that is horizontally structured" (119) and adds in a critical note that nevertheless "Deleuze reads Bartleby's formula as radically indifferent but he does not take into account all what Bartleby has to say and treating his various utterances as a more-or-less monolithic formula he neglects the character's complexity" (119). Her argument thereafter is subtle and forceful in her engagement of three notable thinkers from the past half century.

The prose style of the text is of a satisfactory quality. This helps the candidate to make lucid arguments, which are consistently supported with textual support. Yet there are occasional lapses in style, such as missing definite or indefinite articles, but other than that, all in all the piece is well written.

The candidate could enhance her present thesis later on as a book for publication if she were to be her own harshest critic; i.e., she could play devil's advocate against her own chosen position(s). Secondly: she could elaborate on more of the problems in her chosen theorists. These sorts of reflections would allow her to pursue a certain self-critique or self-problematization that readers of a revised book version of this thesis may find appealing. Thirdly, the candidate may also wish to reflect on one or both of the following two passages in any future work for a published version of the project. Simon Critchley claims in his *The*





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*Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (2012) that for Bartleby “nonviolent violence is not ‘preferring not to.’ It is not an act of refusal. It is, rather, engaging in a series of *preferred* actions, even violent actions, which are necessary but not justifiable” (241). This may recall of course what Sethe does to Beloved in Toni Morrison’s novel of the same name, about which Žižek has also written in his *Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is The Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (2000). Second passage: Peter Sloterdijk writes in his *Spheres, Volume 2: Globes, Macrospherology* (trans., 2014) of “the true world war: the world-historical struggle over the antithesis between power (rootedness, assertion, apparatus and culture) and spirit (uprooting, resistance, anarchy and art). If there were an ‘end of history,’ one would notice it in the expiry of these oppositions” (186). So, one may ask if one can link this formulation to Bartleby in productive ways (but this would again be for a later publication project).

All in all, this dissertation constitutes a substantial contribution to the scholarly discussion in which it wishes to intervene: the phenomenon of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and the critical industry it has spawned with special reference to some leading edge thinkers from the past fifty years. I hereby recommend to the board, as supervisor, that this doctoral dissertation be admitted to the next stage of the defense process.

Sincerely,

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