

Foucault and discursive power : I prefer not to

Foucault's ideas of subject formation are evident in Herman Melville's tale *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*. A discussion of Foucault's theories, related closely to the text, will reveal firstly how discourses divide and regulate individuals. Secondly how these 'dividing practises' construct subject positions which individuals inhabit and finally how individuals comply with this 'normative regime'. This essay will seek to reveal how the character of Bartleby's rejection of this 'normative regime' eventuates in his 'institutionalisation'.

The discourse of business divides and regulates the characters within the text. According to Foucault the term discourse defines a relatively well bounded area of social knowledge. Moreover Selden states,

“Discourse determines what is possible to say, what are the criteria of ‘truth’, who is allowed to speak with authority, and where such speech can be spoken.(1985, p. 154)

The narrator of the text is a lawyer, though not a legal attorney as the narrator states,

“I am one of those lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but do a snug business among rich men's bonds”(Madden, 2002, p. 90).

The narrator is a conveyancer. The narrator in his introduction states , “it is fit I make mention of myself, my *employés*, my business, my chambers, and the general surroundings” (Madden, 2002, p. 90). The narrator is thus a lawyer operating within the discourse of business. The narrator introduces the other characters as the *employés*, or as a translated singular, employee. Employee is defined as “A person who works for another in return for financial or other compensation.” (The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 2000). The word employee forms part of the discourse of business.

The English language is based on binary opposites as Selden states, “underlying our use of language is a *system*, a pattern of paired opposites, binary oppositions(1985, p.69). The binary opposite of employee, within the discourse of business, is the employer defined as “one that hires others to perform a service or engage in an activity in exchange for compensation.” (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Law). Consider the division between the binary opposites. The individuals within the text have been divided and classified through the discourse, language, of business into employer/employee. However, the division, /, is not an inherent true fact, as demonstrated by comparable definitions. The employee is not completely opposite to the employer, simply different. Therefore the division between employer/employee, is a socially constructed divide and not an innate fact. One may consider the relationship between employer/employee.

The narrator, speaks of the “two persons as copyists in my employment.”(Madden, 2002, p.90). Employment is defined as “an activity or service performed for another especially for compensation or as an occupation.” (The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 2000). Therefore one may surmise the narrator is the employer, the dominant binary opposite. The characters, the employees, are aware of the authority vested in the employer. Turkey’s statement, “With submission sir,” (Madden, 2002, p.92) is indicative of the employer’s authority. Submission is defined as “The act of submitting to the power of another.” (The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 2000). The employees thus submit to the employer. The individuals in the text have thus been divided and regulated through the discourse of business. The effect of these ‘dividing practises’ and the identity thus created, is evidenced in the character of Bartleby.

Foucault's central dividing mechanism, the main dividing binary, applied to all individuals, is the normal/abnormal binary. Of this binary Foucault states, "The constant division between normal and the abnormal, to which every individual is subjected,"(1975, p.197). Furthermore human subjects are named and divided through stigmatisation, marking or branding as if with a tattoo. Foucault defines this process as "that of binary division and branding" (1975, p.197), a consequence of discourse. In other words channels of power exist and function to determine an individual subject's status, normal/abnormal, and language forms the basis of this classification. Examination of the character of Bartleby reveals how an individual's subject position can change due to language.

The character of Bartleby's subject position is constructed, in the text, as a result of dividing practises and stigmatisation. The narrator in the text requests Bartleby to "examine a small paper"(Madden, 2002, p.96) and receives the reply "I would prefer not too"(Madden, 2002, p.96). At this reply the narrator crosses the room and declares to Bartleby, "What do you mean? Are you moonstruck?"(Madden, 2002, p.96). Moonstruck is defined as, "Affected by insanity; crazed" (The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 2000). What could account for the employers, Bartleby was employed for his "singularly sedate an aspect"(Madden, 2002, p.95), shift in attitude toward Bartleby? One may argue that Bartleby's status, classification as a subject, that of normal, has been questioned.

The shift in subject status, classification, from normal to abnormal is due to Bartleby's use, or misuse, of language. Within the discourse of business the employer, the narrator, issues work to the employees and has a "natural expectancy of instant compliance" (Madden, 2002, p.96). Therefore within the discourse of business the

employee undertakes work prescribed by the employer, the authority. Bartleby is hired, by the narrator, the employer, as a copyist, an employee. However Bartleby has chosen to reject the socially constructed identity, employee, assigned to him by the discourse of business, through his “preferring” not to accept work, as the narrator states, “a request made according to common usage and common sense”(Madden, 2002, p.97). Bartleby thus is stigmatised, given a mark, a brand or characteristic, that of “moonstruck”, mad and thus abnormal. Bartleby’s subject position as an abnormal employee is exacerbated as he refuses more requests, from the employer, with the simple statement, “I would prefer not too”(Madden, 2002, p.97). The other individuals, employees, begin to perceive Bartleby as odd. Of Bartleby’s reaction to the employers request one individual, Ginger nut, states “he’s a little lunny” (Madden, 2002, p.98). Lunny is a variant of the word loony, defined as “Crazy; insane”(The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 2000). Bartleby has become an abnormal employee.

The subject position of abnormal, and not normal, results in Bartleby losing his ability to exercise power as a subject. Moreover Bartleby is objectified and subjected to, as Foucault states “the existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal”(1975, p.197). Bartleby is ‘institutionalised’. The abnormal subject is objectified and subjected to forces to “brand him and to alter him”(Foucault, 1975, p.197). The final result, in the text, of Bartleby’s new classification of abnormal, the mad employee, is his exile and confinement. Bartleby is institutionalised. In the text Bartleby is “removed to the Tombs as a vagrant”(Madden, 2002, p.114), or “the Tombs or to speak more properly, the Halls of Justice”(Madden, 2002, p.115) in other words gaol. Here Bartleby has no rights as a subject and thus is objectified. Bartleby the employee becomes Bartleby

the vagrant. One may argue that Bartleby's rejection of normative regimes has resulted in his change from subject to object.

Foucault believed power circulated without a central source or control, rather it functions because individuals self regulate within a system. Foucault's model for this voluntary self-regulation of the subject is Bentham's Panopticon. The Panopticon represents both an architectural model for a utopian prison system and a metaphor for the operation of power within society. Foucault states, "Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." (1975, p.197). The Panopticon is described by Foucault as, "at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower;" (1975, p.197). Through effects of lighting and division, of the building into individual cells, the employee can be seen but cannot see the individual, employer, in the tower, who watches. The watched cannot confirm who watches. As Foucault states, "Visibility is a trap." (1975, p.197). If an individual believes that there is a possibility of being seen, the individual thus concludes they are being seen. Foucault argues that the Panopticon is a "way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men." (1975, p.199). For Foucault this model encompasses everyone, the watcher and the watched, all are enmeshed in the mechanism of power. As Foucault states of the individual in the centre, the watcher, "enclosed as he is in the middle of this architectural mechanism, is not the director's own fate bound up with it?" (1975, p.199) The Panopticon relies on surveillance and internal training, self regulation, to produce a state of docility. The docile subject. Normalising power, within modern Western culture, functions with a Panopticon effect.

All human subjects in modern Western culture are subjected to normalising power. Normalising is defined as “To make normal, especially to cause to conform to a standard or norm”(The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 2000) in other words a belief that becomes a fact. Within the discourse of business, with the classification of employer/employee, the dominant binary being employer, Bartleby’s response “I would prefer not to” is not considered a ‘normal’ response. Bartleby in choosing to ignore the ‘norm’, refusing to accept the given socially constructed identity and ‘normal’ characteristics of an employee, is thus deemed abnormal. It is because he has chosen to reject the normalizing regime that Bartleby’s position as a subject becomes abnormal. Thus Bartelby is scorned, objectified and forced into a new subject position, vagrant, unable to exercise power. Bartleby the vagrant is excluded and confined in a institution, the consequence for any subject that fails to heed the powers of the ‘norm’.

One may consider what in modern society is considered, normal and what is considered abnormal. In Herman Melville’s time, 1853, an employee had less individual rights than the employee of 2004. What in 1853 was deemed abnormal would today be seen as perhaps the consequence of a ‘labour dispute’. As time progresses so too the division between normal/abnormal shifts. A ever shifting balance which judges, and classifies, those that are abnormal against those that are normal. A consequence of a society and language based on binary oppositions. The classification of individuals into groups regulated by discourse can result in individuals inhabiting various subject positions throughout a lifetime. However one would hope all these subject positions would be deemed ‘normal’. To cross the divide into the realm of the ‘abnormal’ the individual risks becoming stripped of all rights to exercise power, objectified, confined and excluded from ‘normal’ society.

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