



Herman Melville: *Bartleby the Scrivener*

(1853)

- Christopher Gonzalez (The Ohio State University)

Genre: Story. Country: United States.

After the financial and critical failure of his novels *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Pierre* (1852) and *Israel Potter* (1855), Herman Melville turned to writing stories and novellas. The first result was his pair of stories “The Paradise of Batchelors” and “The Tartarus of Maids” (1855) which offer brilliant satirical allegories on industrialisation, sexual social segregation, the paper industry and the hopelessness of writing. He then produced the novella “Bartleby, the Scrivener” — subtitled “A Story of Wall-Street” — which was serialised in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* in 1853 and then included in *The Piazza Tales* in 1856. “Bartleby” is tale which continues and extends the themes opened in “The Paradise of Batchelors” and “The Tartarus of Maids” but gives them much greater force by developing them in a more realistic mode, telling the tale of an almost credible office clerk in Wall Street whose refusal to write to commercial order becomes – *avant la lettre* – a Kafkaesque commentary on the alienation of labour in the new social space of the urban office.

“Bartleby” is told by an unnamed lawyer, advanced in age, who narrates the story of a scrivener, or law-copyist, named Bartleby, whom the narrator proclaims as the strangest scrivener he ever knew. Indeed, from the outset of his tale, the lawyer admits that a true biography, that is to say, a comprehensive biography for Bartleby, would be near impossible. The lawyer believes his scant contact with his story’s subject will illustrate the frustrating conundrum that Bartleby would present anyone wishing to attempt a definitive understanding of the scrivener in question.

Before relating the events surrounding Bartleby, the lawyer gives a short account of his own life, for, he explains, “such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented” (4). He presents himself as a sensible man who is not given to fits of violence but rather a calm man, especially in matters of business. Incidentally, this image of himself is consistently challenged in the story by his own actions. His second-floor chambers on Wall Street afford two distinct views: a white wall provides a counterpoint to a “lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade” (5). These two antipodal views from the narrator’s chambers take on a greater significance later in the story. The lawyer has two copyists, Turkey and Nippers, and an office boy named Ginger Nut, in his employment. Actually, the names are nicknames; their names, and the names of all save Bartleby, remain a mystery throughout the narrative. Melville here adopts a device often used by Dickens to show how employers avoid recognising the authentic humanity of their employees.

Our narrator, however, is apparently kindly and it becomes clear rather quickly that he has a penchant for forgiving his employees their foibles, no matter how outlandish. Turkey, for example, begins the day in the

office with relative calm, yet his anger waxes as the day grows long, increasing his propensity for making copy errors or spilling his inkwell. Despite this, the lawyer rationalizes why he should not dismiss Turkey. Nippers, the second employee the lawyer describes, serves as a counterpoint for Turkey. Instead of growing irascible as the day goes on, Nippers begins the day in distemper while growing placid as the day ends. Ginger Nut, the youngest of the chambers, primarily has the duty of supplying Turkey and Nippers with snacks and performing other tasks appropriate for a boy of twelve.

As a result of increased work the lawyer seeks an additional scrivener. It is Bartleby who answers the lawyer's advertisement, "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn!" (9). Bartleby's sense of calm strikes the lawyer as a favourable match for his two passionate scriveners, and he decides to hire him on the spot. He places Bartleby in a corner nearby but places a green screen to keep him from sight while simultaneously affording the both of them a bit of privacy. He is impressed at Bartleby's writing output, for the scrivener seems to never take a break from producing copy.

A scrivener's primary task is to produce exact copies of original documents. It is therefore necessary for them to check copy for errors. One day the lawyer requests Bartleby's assistance in checking copy, but Bartleby responds with what will prove to be his signature retort for nearly every request put to him: "I would prefer not to" (10). Thus begins a series of point-counterpoint between the narrator and Bartleby. Initially, the lawyer cannot believe this is an act of wilfulness. The scrivener's maddening calmness, and his rhetorical decision to equivocate by "preferring" not to rather than outright refusing, befuddles the lawyer at every turn. Nonetheless, he pays Bartleby to perform a service, and so he continues to request Bartleby's assistance in matters concerning his job, only to have Bartleby say "I prefer not to." The lawyer confesses that his reaction to this obstinacy in another man would have been to fly "outright into a dreadful passion" (12). Yet Bartleby's mild demeanour "disarms" the narrator. Relying on brute reason, the lawyer confers with Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut — all of whom agree the lawyer is perfectly in the right. Despite this agreement, Bartleby remains implacably entrenched in his "hermitage", little concerned with the lawyer's expectations. The lawyer therefore resolves to let some time pass while he considers Bartleby's behaviour more carefully.

Soon the lawyer observes that Bartleby always seems to be in the office and eats only the smallest snacks that Ginger Nut brings him. He also admits "Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance" (13). But the lawyer, who continually confesses that he is a well-tempered man, again rationalizes Bartleby's behaviour as he does for Turkey and Nippers. "He is useful to me", he admits. "I can get along with him. If I turn him away, the chances are he will fall in with some less indulgent employer, and then he will be rudely treated, and perhaps driven forth miserably to starve. Yes" (13).

Bartleby prefers not to proofread copy, and in time prefers not to perform the most basic of tasks, such as checking the post office (only three minutes away) for mail, until he is only producing copy without any other responsibilities. The lawyer becomes reconciled to this fact, until one Sunday morning, on the way "to hear a celebrated preacher", he stops at his chambers. He is shocked to find his key unable to open the lock and aghast to find "the apparition of Bartleby" within the office. Bartleby, refusing the lawyer entry into his own place of business, tells him to return later. Upon his return the lawyer discovers that Bartleby has been residing within the chambers. Instead of feeling anger or betrayal, the narrator is overwhelmed by "an overpowering stinging melancholy" for the scrivener. Indeed, he realizes he has more in common with Bartleby than he initially realized, seeing both he and Bartleby as "sons of Adam". He also recalls that for long stretches of time Bartleby would stare at the only view afforded him through the "pale window", a "dead brick wall". In fact, the lawyer often refers to Bartleby's "dead-wall reveries", though he does not yet realize their significance. On that Sunday, the lawyer recognizes that "[he] might give alms to [Bartleby's] body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach" (19).

The lawyer resolves to question Bartleby regarding his past, hoping for some clue to the mystery the scrivener

presents, only to be stymied with preferences not to answer. And soon he finds that members of the office, including himself, are beginning to unconsciously use the word Bartleby relies on so much—prefer. Essentially, Bartleby's influence has pervaded everyone with whom he has come in contact. Yet while his influence spreads, Bartleby himself withdraws further, now devoting his time to nothing but his dead-wall reveries, perhaps driven to this end by the lawyer's confrontation the previous day. Unable to comprehend why Bartleby is no longer writing, he concludes there must be something amiss with the scrivener's vision. Days later, he is surprised to learn Bartleby has given up copying entirely.

Bartleby becomes a "fixture" within the office, and his presence there has become utterly superfluous. However, the lawyer cannot bring himself to have Bartleby evicted, noting "he seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe. A bit of wreck in the mid-Atlantic" (22). Yet he feels eventually compelled to act, giving Bartleby six days to leave. In turn, Bartleby lives up to his description as a fixture by remaining in the office after the six days are concluded. Having no other choice, the lawyer confronts Bartleby, ordering him to leave and providing him with twenty dollars beyond what he owes. It is no good, for Bartleby refuses both the directive to leave and the proffered monetary compensation. The battle of wills culminates in the simple outcome of Bartleby's decision: will he leave or will he remain? In keeping with all of the events that have thus transpired, Bartleby thwarts the lawyer's expectations once more. His passionate remonstrations are contrasted, as always, with Bartleby's gentleness. The scrivener reaches a point where he no longer answers the lawyer's questions, even with his declamation of preferring not to.

The lawyer is moved to such resentment that he takes a moment to remember a gruesome murder (the real-life murder of Samuel Adams by John C. Colt in New York City), and how Colt had allowed himself "to get wildly excited" and kill Adams with a hatchet. He is unnerved by the parallel, and instead he turns to Jesus' commandment to love one another. The lawyer believes all men should follow this commandment, if for no other reason than out of self-interest. The next day commences as any other; the office goes about its normal routine, Bartleby transfixed before his dead wall. Days later, after reading the theologians Joseph Priestley and Jonathan Edwards, the lawyer believes that Bartleby was "predestined from eternity" for some "mysterious purpose" (26). He comes to terms with the decision to allow Bartleby to remain in his hermitage unmolested.

In spite of this newfound peace with his situation, the lawyer must ultimately be rid of Bartleby. The scrivener's utter strangeness is bad for business. After conjuring a host of desperate plans, he decides to move his office and leave Bartleby staring at his wall. It is not long before the new tenants of the lawyer's old "haunt" inquire regarding Bartleby. When they discover Bartleby to be his former employee, they insist that he remove the mysterious scrivener. Presenting Bartleby with a series of options, the lawyer explodes into a rage when he is turned down at every opportunity. Bartleby prefers to remain "stationary" and is soon sent to the Tombs, a prison in Manhattan, for vagrancy.

The lawyer receives a note telling of Bartleby's incarceration and decides to go to the Tombs himself, being perhaps the only man who can speak on Bartleby's behalf. He is given permission to see Bartleby, who is engaged in another dead-wall reverie. Now clearly antagonistic to the lawyer, Bartleby refuses to see him, literally facing the opposite direction. The lawyer pays the "grub-man" to ensure Bartleby does not lack sustenance, but the scrivener only responds "I prefer not to dine to-day" (32). Days later the narrator finds Bartleby lying at the base of the wall. And when the grub-man asks if the scrivener is only asleep, the lawyer replies with an allusion to Job, "With kings and counsellors" (33). Bartleby is dead.

In what functions as an epilogue, the lawyer relates some further information regarding Bartleby. Though he unhesitatingly qualifies the information as "rumor" and "vague", he says Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office—a centralized location where undeliverable letters are processed. This newfound information, however dubious, moves the lawyer. In direct address to the reader, the lawyer asks, "Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men?" (34). In the story's closing, he rhetorically wonders what better vocation

there is for a man who is by nature hopeless—a man who literally destroys the hopes of countless unknown people who can no longer derive any benefit from the items within those undeliverable envelopes. The lawyer's final words – “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!” – invite the reader to see Bartleby as a general symbol, but exactly what he symbolises remains profoundly enigmatic.

“Bartleby, the Scrivener” has been read as a Christian allegory of martyrdom, charity and forbearance; as a commentary on the contradictions between the needs of employers and the needs of employees, and as the expression of Melville's personal hatred of being forced to write to commercial order (he derided his own *White-Jacket* and *Redburn* as “two jobs, done for money”). Arguably its enduring strength derives from the way it articulates conditions of mental servitude which were to become more and more pervasive in the next 150 years, and dignifies Bartleby as a modest man who simply refuses to accept that drudgery can legitimately be the sum of any person's destiny.

Page references are to “Bartleby, the Scrivener” in *Melville's Short Novels*. Ed. Dan McCall. New York: W.W. Norton, 2002. 3-34.

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