

## ANALYSIS

“Bartleby the Scrivener” (1855)



Herman Melville

(1819-1991)

“He was a stubborn man and often said No to his family and close friends.... Are these dead letters Melville’s own novels...?”

Willard Thorp  
*Afterward, Billy Budd and Other Tales*  
(NAL/Signet 1961) 327

“Bartleby symbolizes, in a surrealistic fashion, the artist who refuses to compose as he is bidden by society.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962) 726

“It has been variously interpreted: as a dramatization of the Freudian death-wish; as a parable in which Bartleby-Melville swears he will send no more letters to the Dead-Letter Office (i.e., write no more at the top of his bent for readers who cannot understand him); and as an oath...that Bartleby will no longer serve the country of which Wall Street is the symbol [Marxist].”

William M. Gibson & George Arms, eds.  
*Twelve American Writers*  
(Macmillan 1962) 267-68

“This moderately successful Wall Street lawyer is a congenial masked-man who is aware of the mask and just a bit cynical about it. But his profound sympathies for Bartleby (and, in his closing sigh, for all humanity) demonstrate that his cynicism is kept well within bounds, as does, too, his toleration of his other clerks, the all too human, dyspeptic, and frequently quarrelsome Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut...[who] contrast with Bartleby’s emotionless, silent, and ultimate withdrawal.”

James E. Miller, Jr.  
*A Reader’s Guide to Herman Melville*

(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1962) 161

“As Christ explains in *Matthew 25*, the least of men (particularly when he appears as a stranger) is the physical representative and representation of Christ.... As the story of *Bartleby* unfolds, it becomes increasingly apparent that it is in part a testing of this message of Christ.... The narrator discovers that this very day is ‘an election day’.... ‘For the very soul of me,’ he ironically admits... *Bartleby* is, like Christ, ‘numbered with the transgressors’ (Mark 15:28).... When the narrator more or less meets the last condition laid down in *Matthew 25*—visiting the stranger in prison—all his charity is shown to be too little and too late.... Perhaps, as the last few paragraphs of the story hint, *Matthew 25* and its entire context is now the Dead Letter Office.)”

H. Bruce Franklin  
*The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology*  
(Stanford 1963) 126-27, 130-31, 133

“I should like to suggest that the germ of the character *Bartleby* came not from Melville's searchings of his own relationship to society or from any bitterness in his hardening heart but from an external contemporary source, namely Thoreau's withdrawal from society.... In 1850 Melville borrowed Thoreau's *Merrimack* from Evert Duyckinck's private library.... Melville had ample opportunity to get the basis for his ‘*Bartleby*’ from the so-called hermit of Walden Pond. He had available to him a published source which he used both in general outline and in some detail....

Melville quietly writes a satire to show that...to squat somewhere and live within yourself is to refrain from living.... *Bartleby* has his way. He does not choose to help verify copy. Others must do his work, the work which normally would be expected of him. Thoreau lived on Emerson's land by Walden Pond. He borrowed Alcott's axe. Someone else paid his tax to keep him out of prison. ‘In fact,’ Thoreau wrote in his essay, ‘I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her I can’... This is Melville's picture of the Thoreau he abstracted from ‘Resistance to Civil Government’...individualism...carried to its logical and absurd conclusion.... *Bartleby*, too, simply wished to refuse. He stood aloof. He never gave reasons. He never argued. He embodied passive nonco-operation. He was a squatter, and he lived within himself.... It may well be that Melville's own sense of isolation entered into the employer's feeling toward *Bartleby*.”

Egbert S. Oliver  
*Studies in American Literature:*  
*Whitman, Emerson, Melville and Others*  
(Eurasia/Ram Nagar, New Delhi 1965) 42-48, 51-52

“Society protests the presence of this hippie in the building and *Bartleby* is removed to a prison. Here he refuses food and soon dies.... When we remember Melville's earlier scorn for writing to public demand, it takes no special courage or insight to interpret *Bartleby* as a comical-tragical mirror figure for the author himself, who by projecting this character in a completely original (uncopied) story thus exorcised the ghost of old defeats.”

Howard P. Vincent  
*Guide to Melville*  
(Charles E. Merrill 1969) 29

“The only survivor of *Bartleby's* catastrophe is the narrator, placid and uncomprehending to the end, firmly entrenched on the ‘Lee Shore’.... He is that sort of man one tends to find in high places: the snug man whose worldly success has convinced him that this is the ‘best of all possible worlds,’ and whose virtues cluster around a ‘prudential’ concern for maintaining his own station. The narrator can never fully understand or truly befriend *Bartleby* because the narrator is simply too complacent, both philosophically and morally, to sympathize with human dissatisfaction and despair.”

Allan Moore Emery  
“The Alternatives of Melville's ‘*Bartleby*’”  
*Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 31.2  
(September 1976) 187

“What is new about Melville’s story is its formal innovations: the skillful use of the flawed narrator; the symbolic setting; the psychological and metaphysical suggestions. In *Bartleby*, Melville creates Wall Street’s ultimate ‘pale young man’ who reflects the mechanical lifelessness that surrounds him and who represents the hollowness at the core of this Wall Street existence. Even his ‘rebellion’ is an extension of his lifelessness, for it is performed in a totally passive, unemotional way.... We view all the characters and events in ‘Bartleby’ through the distorting lens of a lawyer who epitomizes bourgeois respectability. The narrator is genteel, pious, non-contemplative, mildly materialistic, passionless....another embodiment of the kind of decorous civility and bland conventionalism Melville had sharply satirized throughout *Pierre*.”

David S. Reynolds  
*Beneath the American Renaissance:  
The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*  
(Harvard 1989) 296-97

Melville wrote “Bartleby” during his disillusionment following the publication of *Moby-Dick* (1851). His feelings at that time about whether to go on writing may be embodied in *Bartleby*. His story dramatizes the conflict between the business ethic and the charitable ethic, between practicality and idealism, between typical human nature and Christianity. Complete charity is the proof of a true Christian and *Bartleby* puts to the test the narrator’s claim to be one.

The elderly attorney telling us the story from his limited perspective quotes scripture and claims to be living by the “divine injunction” to love one another. However, like Benjamin Franklin, he sees charity as in his own enlightened self-interest. He has “no better motive.” Nonetheless, as his patience is tested, although he fails to go so far as to be a true Christian, he acts with more charity than would most readers, challenging our humanity as *Bartleby* does his—“Ah, *Bartleby*! Ah, humanity!”

The parallelism of the last line equates *Bartleby* with humanity, in an allegory dramatizing what happens to humanity in a world dominated by self-interest and capitalist priorities, even in our personal lives. How many readers would invite *Bartleby* home to live with them, as the narrator does? Just as *Moby-Dick* mirrors the projections of the crew, *Bartleby* mirrors the humanity of both the narrator and the reader. The less we know about *Bartleby* the more blank and mirrorlike he is.

According to Christ, “Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” *Bartleby* is one of the least of these: he is the “forlornest of mankind.” All we know about him, and this is only a rumor, is that he unfairly lost his job as a clerk in the Dead Letter Office in the national capital, due to politics. Now he feels lost himself and Melville shows that the Gospels are dead letters in a Wall Street World.

The identification of *Bartleby* with Christ through parallels is a strong thematic motif throughout the story: *Bartleby* is a mysterious stranger, “one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable except from the original sources.” His first appearance is called an “advent.” He has “nothing else earthly to do” and his passive resistance exasperates prevailing authority. The narrator sees him as sent by Providence, as “like the last column of some ruined temple,” and acknowledges what is at stake by using the expression “for the very soul of me.” He betrays *Bartleby* on “election” day, an old Calvinist term referring to predestined salvation or damnation. In his case, however, he seems predestined by his nature. He is a typical human being who reaches the end of his patience when *Bartleby* refuses to do any work and then actually moves into his office and refuses to leave--conducting the first sit-in demonstration in literary history.

The narrator denies *Bartleby* three times, as Peter denied Christ in the Gospels. *Bartleby* is taken off to prison among thieves and murderers, where he dies not as the founder of a great religion, worshiped forever, but like the Unknown Office Worker before workman’s compensation, unemployed and curled up in fetal position facing a blank wall, dead of depression with his eyes open. Ah, humanity!

The attorney narrator is “filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is best,” he does a “snug business,” is “an eminently *safe* man” and gives a high priority to his social position. His chambers on Wall Street have a view of a lofty blank wall, only ten feet away. When he hires *Bartleby*, he assigns

him to a corner with a window looking out at a blank wall only three feet away, with “no view at all.” Light comes down from far above. “Still further to a satisfactory arrangement,” he seats him behind a high folding screen to “isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice.” He wants to give orders without having to see his employee as a person.

Before copy machines, scribes had to copy legal documents by hand, work of incredible tedium. Copying is conforming. At the time, readers would identify easily with Bartleby when he prefers not to copy anymore. The other clerks in the office are rendered at length in order to establish a realistic context and contrast to Bartleby. Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut are quirky clerks yet typical of human nature, with names referring to nature. They are useful to the attorney, despite their limitations, whereas Bartleby soon prefers not to do any copying at all. His repetition of “I prefer not to” is a symptom of spiritual paralysis. He becomes so pathetic, the attorney sees an opportunity to profit by not dismissing him: “To befriend Bartleby, to humor him in his strange willfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience.”

Eventually, however, the narrator rationalizes, “it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach... Somehow, the things I had seen disqualified me from churchgoing.” When he notices Bartleby standing at his window staring at the blank wall, he asks him why he prefers not to do any more writing. “Do you not see the reason for yourself?” Bartleby indifferently replies. He sees nothing ahead but a blankness like the wall outside his window. The universe feels meaningless. The attorney is no existentialist and infers a material explanation for Bartleby’s alienation--ironically, that something has “impaired his vision.” He fires Bartleby, but offers to write him a letter of recommendation--probably reminding Bartleby of his previous job in the Dead Letter Office: “...my vanity got the better of my pity. I could not but highly plume myself on my masterly management in getting rid of Bartleby.”

Later, however, when he decides that Bartleby must have been sent by Providence, he tells the clerk that his mission in this world is to provide him with lodgings in his office. As soon as some business associates make uncharitable remarks “scandalizing my professional reputation,” he betrays Bartleby. Three times, as Peter betrayed Christ: Bartleby “is nothing to me”; “I know nothing about him”; “In vain I persisted that Bartleby was nothing to me.” Yet he then offers to let Bartleby move into his dwelling, instead of living in his office. He does not see that he himself personifies the inhumane Wall Street mentality that has so alienated his clerk.

Bartleby is taken to the Tombs as a vagrant, where the narrator visits him, echoing the book of *Matthew*. He offers too little charity too late and denies any responsibility for Bartleby’s alienation. Bartleby will not look at him, recalling the screen the narrator used so he would not have to see Bartleby: “I know you,” he said without looking around--and I want nothing to say to you.” The walls of the Tombs are described as ancient Egyptian, comparing America to another slaveholding civilization and indicating that some workers here are wage slaves.

Visiting again later, the attorney finds Bartleby dead, curled up in fetal position facing a blank wall like the one out his window at the office. Though the narrator is alive, his eyes are figuratively shut. Bartleby dies with his eyes open, having seen an Existential truth among landsmen quite different from the divine Truth manifest to Ishmael in *Moby-Dick* at sea. The grubman thinks that Bartleby is asleep. When the narrator, a counselor, replies, “with kings and counselors,” the joke is on him. Ah, Bartleby! Ah, narrator! Melville had a friend, a German philologist, who was sent to an asylum for agoraphobia. If what ails Bartleby could be reduced to a medical term, the meanings of his story likewise would be reduced.

Michael Hollister (2014)

“I shall at last be worn out and perish.... What I feel most moved to write, that is banned--it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way, I cannot.”

Melville, letter to Hawthorne (June 1851)