

Bartleby the Scrivener, A Tale of Wall Street Study Guide



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Summary

“Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” was one of the first stories that Melville published during the brief period when his work was accepted by the major periodicals. It has become his most widely known story, praised for being ahead of its time. The story focuses on a prosperous lawyer, who prides himself on being a “safe man.”

Ensnconced in his Wall Street law offices, the lawyer manages an office of complementary contrasting scriveners (law copyists) who represent opposing types. The lawyer works around the limitations of his employees in the optimistic belief that his is the enlightened and most effective way to lead life. In effect, he attempts to avoid conflict and promotes compromise. He stands as a representative of nineteenth century American optimism, an outlook that Melville questioned in much of his writing.

When a cadaverous man named Bartleby approaches him for employment, the lawyer, pressed for extra help at the time, gladly puts the new employee to work. Bartleby is clearly capable of doing acceptable work, but before long he exhibits an annoying refusal to engage in certain tedious activities, such as proofreading documents. Pressed for time, the lawyer works around this unusual refusal, but before long he discovers that Bartleby is living in the offices at night, subsisting on ginger nuts that he stores in his desk. The lawyer’s uneasiness is compounded when Bartleby begins to refuse all work, refuses to leave the premises, and spends much time staring out a window at the brick wall only inches away from him.

The lawyer’s melioristic optimism is pushed to the limit. He tries to discuss the situation with Bartleby, attempts reasoning with him, even attempts bribing him. He invites him to stay at his home. Bartleby’s maddening response is always the same: “I would prefer not to.” The lawyer eventually surrenders, trying to escape his responsibility for this strange, broken human being by moving his offices and leaving Bartleby behind, but before long the new residents of the building are complaining about the strange character who lives in the hallways. The lawyer renounces any responsibility, and Bartleby is hauled off to the Tombs, the city prison, where he is surrounded by walls such as those he stared at from the lawyer’s window.

The lawyer tries to bribe a jailer to assure that Bartleby is treated well, but upon his return weeks later, he discovers that Bartleby has been refusing to eat and has died of malnutrition. At the story’s end, when the lawyer sighs “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!” the reader recognizes the universal implications of the story and knows that the lawyer will be unable to approach life with the same simplistic optimism he had before.

As an epilogue of sorts, the narrator adds a bit of information about Bartleby’s past, explaining that he had been previously employed in the dead letter office of the post office. In this position he was repeatedly faced with the tragedies of miscommunication. This revelation should not serve as an easy explanation for

Bartleby's condition, however, for Melville's story depicts the mystery of despair and argues that some suffering is beyond melioration. Melville's "story of Wall Street" has been praised for its modernity. Certainly the tale foreshadows the twentieth and twenty-first century theme of urban alienation and describes a dehumanized environment of brick and mortar that is shut off from the consolations of the natural world.

Summary

"Bartleby the Scrivener" is narrated by a prosperous Wall Street lawyer who, in "the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat," does "a snug business among rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title-deeds." Among his clients, the nameless narrator is proud to report, was John Jacob Astor, the richest man in the United States at the time of his death.

The narrator's employees, as the story begins, are Turkey and Nippers, who are scriveners, or copyists, and Ginger Nut, a young office boy. The Dickensian copyists present problems for their employer, for each displays a different personality during each half of the working day. Turkey, who is short and fat, works quickly and steadily before noon but becomes clumsy and ill-tempered after his midday meal. At the opposite extreme is the dyspeptic Nippers, nervous and irritable in the mornings but mild and productive in the afternoons. Because they are regular in their inconsistent behavior, the narrator reports that he "never had to do with their eccentricities at one time," and the work of the office proceeds, with Ginger Nut keeping the scriveners under some control by supplying them with cakes and apples.

The unusual order of the office is disrupted when the lawyer, because of extra work created by his being appointed a Master in Chancery, hires an additional copyist. At first, Bartleby works constantly, but one day he suddenly declines to compare a copied document and its original, offering no explanation, saying simply, "I would prefer not to." Gradually, he prefers not to perform any of his tasks. His employer also discovers that Bartleby has no home other than the office and is sleeping there nights and weekends, eating little more than ginger nuts (small, spicy cakes).

The lawyer pleads with Bartleby to work or leave, but the obstinate scrivener continues to pursue his preference not to do anything. Growing increasingly distraught over these circumstances, the lawyer finally moves his chambers to another building. When Bartleby is expelled from the office by the new tenant, he remains in the building. The lawyer makes final pleas, even offering to take Bartleby home with him. Still, the scrivener prefers not to make any change, and the narrator flees the city in his frustration. On his return, he learns that Bartleby has been taken to the Tombs, the forbiddingly named city prison, as a vagrant.

The lawyer bribes a Tombs employee to take care of Bartleby, but the prisoner refuses to eat, preferring to stand beside and stare at the prison wall. The narrator tries to convince him that his surroundings are not that depressing; the prisoner replies, "I know where I am." Eventually, he dies.

After Bartleby's death, the lawyer learns that he had previously been a clerk in the Dead Letter Office in Washington and thinks that such a melancholy duty explains the poor man's peculiar behavior. He ends his story by proclaiming its pathetic universality: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!"

Summary: The Law Office on Wall Street and Bartleby's Peculiar Resistance

The Law Office on Wall Street

The narrator of "Bartleby the Scrivener" begins the story by introducing the reader to the law office on Wall Street of which he was the manager when he first met Bartleby. The narrator describes himself as an

unambitious, elderly lawyer who has enjoyed a comfortable tenure as Master in Chancery. Before hiring Bartleby, the narrator—henceforth referred to as the lawyer—employed two law-copyists, or scribes, and one office boy. The lawyer describes each of his employees in turn. The elder scrivener, nicknamed Turkey, is nearing sixty and it is implied that he drinks heavily on his lunch hour. The other scrivener, who goes by the nickname Nippers, is younger and considered overly ambitious by the narrator. The office boy is called Ginger Nut after the cakes which he brings to the two scribes.

Bartleby's Peculiar Resistance

Because of an increased work load at his office, the lawyer is forced to hire a third scrivener. He hires Bartleby mostly on account of his sedate and respectable demeanor, which he hopes will temper the manners of his other two scribes. The lawyer situates Bartleby behind a high folding screen and in front of a window that looks out upon a wall. Bartleby is quietly industrious in his work until the third day, when he is asked to proofread some documents. To the lawyer's astonishment, Bartleby responds to his request with the simple reply, "I would prefer not to." The lawyer feels the urge to dismiss Bartleby instantly, but he finds himself unnerved by Bartleby's perfect composure. A few days later, the lawyer asks Bartleby again to proofread some documents with the other scribes. Once again, Bartleby declines with the curt refusal, "I would prefer not to." This time the narrator attempts to reason with Bartleby and demands a fuller explanation of his unwillingness. When Bartleby will not respond, the lawyer points to the reasonableness of his request and appeals to Bartleby's common sense. Failing to sway him, the lawyer entreats Turkey, Nippers, and even Ginger Nut to attest to the reasonableness of the request. They comply, but Bartleby remains unmoved. Vexed by Bartleby's resistance, the lawyer carries on with business, unwilling to take any action. The next day, Bartleby again refuses to proofread and also refuses to run an errand, each time explaining softly, "I would prefer not to." While Turkey offers to "black his eyes," the lawyer instead chooses to tolerate Bartleby's disobedience without punishment.

The lawyer stops by the office on a Sunday on his way to church. To his surprise, he discovers that Bartleby has been living in the office, apparently because he has no other home. At first the lawyer pities Bartleby's state of loneliness, but upon reflection his feelings turn to fear and repulsion. He observes that Bartleby does not read or converse with people and sometimes stands for long periods staring blankly out at the walls. Finally, the lawyer resolves to ask Bartleby about his history and his life and to dismiss him if he will not answer.

Summary: The Lawyer Attempts to Rid Himself of Bartleby and Bartleby Dies in Prison

The Lawyer Attempts to Rid Himself of Bartleby

The next morning, the lawyer questions Bartleby about his personal life. Bartleby replies that he prefers not to answer. The lawyer begs Bartleby to cooperate and be reasonable, but Bartleby responds that he prefers not to be reasonable. The lawyer resolves that he must rid himself of Bartleby before the rebellion spreads to the other scribes—who, he notes, have begun to use the expression "prefer" for the first time—but he takes no immediate action. The next day, Bartleby informs the lawyer that he has given up copying—the one task that he had been willing to perform previously. Several more days pass. Finally, the lawyer is satisfied that Bartleby will never resume his work. He tells Bartleby that he must vacate the premises by the end of six days. At the end of the sixth day, the lawyer reminds Bartleby that he must leave, gives him his wages plus twenty dollars, and tells him goodbye. The next day Bartleby is still there. Exasperated, the lawyer decides that he will not use physical force or call the police, remembering the Bible's injunction "that ye love one another." Instead, he attempts to conduct his business as usual, ignoring the fact that Bartleby inhabits his office without working and refuses to leave. This state of affairs lasts until the lawyer becomes aware that Bartleby's presence in his office has become the subject of much gossip which has jeopardized his professional reputation. Unable to convince Bartleby to leave and unwilling to bear the whispers about him,

the lawyer decides to move his office to a new location. When a new office space has been secured, the lawyer removes all of his possessions from the old office, leaving Bartleby standing in an empty room. He again gives Bartleby money and abandons him with some regret. A few days later, a stranger visits the lawyer's new office and insists that he come and get Bartleby. The lawyer refuses. Several days later a small crowd entreats him to do something about Bartleby, who is still inhabiting the old office. Fearing exposure in the papers, the lawyer speaks to Bartleby and tries to induce him to leave. He interrogates Bartleby as to what he would like to do and suggests several occupations. Finally, the lawyer invites Bartleby to come home with him and live there until he can decide what he would like to do. Bartleby declines this offer, and the lawyer flees from the scene, telling himself that there is nothing more he can do to help. After a short vacation, the lawyer returns to work to find a note from his previous landlord stating that Bartleby has been taken to prison. This decisive action satisfies the lawyer, who agrees in retrospect that there was no other alternative.

Bartleby Dies in Prison

The lawyer visits the prison, where he makes a sympathetic report about Bartleby to the police and asks that Bartleby be removed to the poor house. The lawyer then visits Bartleby, who is unwilling to speak with him and stares blankly at the prison wall. When he discovers that Bartleby has not been eating, the lawyer tips the grubman a few dollars to be sure that Bartleby gets dinner. The lawyer returns to the prison a few days later and finds Bartleby lying dead in the prison courtyard. Apparently having starved himself to death, Bartleby's withered body is found curled up, eyes open, facing the prison wall. To conclude his tale, the lawyer offers the reader a vague rumor about Bartleby as a possible explanation of his behavior. This famous passage concludes the story: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!"

Themes: Themes and Meanings

The wealth of thematic possibilities in "Bartleby the Scrivener" has made it perhaps the most analyzed of all American short stories. Much of this analysis centers on the title character, who is seen as a forerunner of alienated modern man, as the victim of an indifferent society, as a nonconformist—perhaps even a heroic one—who becomes isolated simply for daring to assert his preferences. Another interpretation, built around Bartleby's role as a writer of sorts, claims that Herman Melville's story is a parable of the isolation of the artist in a materialistic society that not only is indifferent to its writers but also is bent on their destruction.

Such views, while having varying degrees of validity, ignore the fact that "Bartleby the Scrivener" is dominated by the sensibility of its narrator and his search for the truth, a search that is ironic because he is incapable of any objective understanding of Bartleby and his seemingly perverse preferences. Not Bartleby's actions or passivity but the narrator's responses to his copyist are what is important.

Early in the story, the lawyer describes himself as "an eminently safe man," one "who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best." He makes allowances for Turkey and Nippers because that is the easiest way to deal with them, but he is unable to understand why he cannot similarly control Bartleby.

When his initial efforts with Bartleby fail, he attempts to turn the predicament to his advantage. The sentimental narrator tries to change the scrivener from an intractable problem to an opportunity for compassion. However, this compassion, as is appropriate for a man of Wall Street who exults in John Jacob Astor's name, "for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion," is selfish: "Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. 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." For him, the moral and the financial seem inseparable.

When compassion proves insufficient, the narrator resorts to philosophical explanations. Reading Jonathan Edwards's *The Freedom of the Will* (1754) and Joseph Priestley's *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated* (1777) convinces him that Bartleby has been "billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like me to fathom." This evasion of responsibility is not the answer, however, because people are talking about him. Because the good opinions of others are essential to his business and his self-esteem, the lawyer is finally forced to act.

Melville is satirizing the materialistic society of his time but in a much larger sense than merely its indifference to writers. Melville is attacking its smug morality, its pomposity, its sentimental, patronizing attitude toward its individual citizens, its simplistic view of the complex and the ambiguous, its persistent ignorance of its responsibilities. Not Bartleby but the self-deceiving narrator is the absurd, pathetic protagonist.

Themes

Individualism/Peer Pressure

One of the primary themes of the story involves the pressure toward conformity in American business life that inhibits the creative development of the individual. It is not coincidental that the story is set on Wall Street, which is the center of American financial and business affairs. By choosing legal scribes as his subject, Melville emphasizes the intellectually stultifying atmosphere of the business world since scribes create nothing of their own but instead mechanically copy the ideas and work of others. In fact, the lawyer is initially attracted to Bartleby because he seems to lack strong personality and independent will, making him seem like a model employee. Significantly, when Bartleby resists, he is either unable or unwilling to explain the reason for his discontent. Perhaps Bartleby's ability to think independently has been so damaged that he does not even have the words to express his own vague desires. In keeping with this theme, the lawyer himself fears nonconformity so much that he is moved to take action regarding Bartleby only when he hears that people are gossiping about his office arrangements.

Freedom and Imprisonment

Related to the theme of individualism in "Bartleby the Scrivener" is the issue of freedom. Walls are pervasive in the story. Symbolically, the office is located on Wall Street, and the office's windows look out onto walls on all sides. Bartleby has a tendency to stare blankly at the wall, lost in what the lawyer calls "a dead-wall reverie." Bartleby seems to feel imprisoned in his life, and it is significant that he eventually dies in prison. Through the character of Bartleby, Melville seems to be questioning the nature of human freedom. In a historical sense, it could be argued that Bartleby is trapped by the emerging capitalist economy which demands that he sell his time and labor in exchange for low wages. At the time, capitalism was often condemned by those suspicious of economic independence and referred to as "wage-slavery." In a philosophical sense, Bartleby may be trapped by the inability to grasp with certainty the underlying reason or meaning of existence.

Apathy and Passivity

Another theme of the story involves the apathy and passivity of both Bartleby and the lawyer. Bartleby's rebellion is one of inaction. He passively resists his employer's instructions and chooses instead to do nothing. Bartleby displays a disturbing degree of apathy about his own fate. When questioned by the lawyer as to what he would prefer to do if given the choice, Bartleby responds that he is not particular. In fact, nothing appeals to him. Eventually, Bartleby's inaction leads to his own death by starvation, which seems to be less the result of self-hatred than of a most profound indifference toward his own life. The lawyer in turn finds himself unable to take decisive action regarding Bartleby's behavior, opting to procrastinate in hopes that the problem will solve itself. This attitude may indicate a level of coldness to Bartleby's suffering, since the lawyer appears to be concerned primarily with Bartleby's performance at work. In their own way, both characters are seized

by an overpowering apathy towards their fellow men that paralyzes them.

Class Conflict

One of the primary tensions in the story involves the conflict of interest between the lawyer and his three scribes. As an employer and the holder of a distinguished legal position, the lawyer inhabits a very different social world from the scribes. Since the story is told through his eyes, part of the irony of "Bartleby the Scribe" stems from the lawyer's inadvertent revelation of his class prejudices through his narration. For instance, at one point the lawyer describes his annoyance at Turkey's ragged wardrobe. He remarks condescendingly that he supposed one of "so small an income" probably could not afford a new coat, yet it never occurs to him that if he wished him to appear more respectable he could simply raise Turkey's wages. Also, the lawyer never considers the mind-numbing monotony of copying legal documents as a cause of his scribes' eccentricities. Instead, he continually focuses on improving the productivity of his office at the expense of considering the well-being of his employees. The lawyer's insensitivity to the suffering of his employees foreshadows his inability to fathom Bartleby's discontent with his job.

Character Analysis: Bartleby

The title character of the story, Bartleby, is hired by the lawyer as a scribe, whose job is to copy out legal documents by hand. Bartleby is described as neat, pale, and forlorn. Although Bartleby's demeanor suggests sadness or discontent, he never expresses any emotion in the story and is described by the lawyer as "mechanical" in his actions. The plot of the story revolves around Bartleby's enigmatic refusal to carry out his employer's orders. When asked to perform a task, Bartleby frequently responds, "I would prefer not to." This peculiarly passive form of resistance causes his employer much consternation. Eventually, Bartleby refuses to do anything at all and simply stares vacantly at the wall. Bartleby is finally carried off to prison, where he starves himself to death. The reason for Bartleby's disturbed state of mind is never revealed, although the lawyer believes it may have something to do with a previous job that Bartleby may have held in the dead letter office of the U.S. Post Office. Because so little is learned about Bartleby in the story, critics have tended to interpret him in purely symbolic terms.

Character Analysis: Other Characters

Ginger Nut

Ginger Nut is the nickname of the twelve-year-old boy hired to run small errands around the law office for a dollar a week. His name is derived from the ginger nut cakes that he brings every day to the two scribes, Turkey and Nippers. Ginger Nut's father hopes that his job will one day help him enter a legal career. The lawyer describes him as quick-witted.

Lawyer

Although he is not the title character, the lawyer, who narrates the story, is arguably the key figure in "Bartleby the Scribe." He is approximately sixty-years-old and holds the prestigious position of Master in Chancery. His job is widely viewed as a sinecure—a profitable position requiring little actual work that is given to relatives or friends of the very powerful. The lawyer describes himself as a "safe" and "unambitious" man. He seems to pride himself on his even temper, prudence, and gentility. Because the story is told from his point of view, determining the lawyer's prejudices and social outlook is crucial to an interpretation of the story. The narrative revolves around the lawyer's reactions to Bartleby's behavior. Some critics contend that the lawyer empathizes on some level with Bartleby's despair and find his intentions toward Bartleby generally admirable. Others view him as a pathetic figure whose supposedly "liberal" outlook only serves to mask (even from himself) his self-interest in exploiting and controlling the Bartlebys of the world.

Nippers

Nippers is the nickname of the younger scrivener in the law office. Nippers is described as a well-dressed young man about twenty-five years of age. The lawyer believes that Nippers suffers from indigestion in the mornings, which causes him to be restless and discontented. In the afternoon, his work is more steady. Nippers seems dissatisfied with his position as a scrivener. The lawyer believes him to be overly ambitious because he displays an unusual interest in the lawyer's business affairs, and he is often visited by suspicious-looking men to whom he refers as "clients" but who appear to be bill collectors.

Turkey

Turkey is the nickname of the elder scrivener in the law office. He is identified as an Englishman of approximately sixty years of age who wears dirty clothes. In the mornings, Turkey is industrious and able to ingratiate himself with his employer with his charming manners. In the afternoons, Turkey becomes irritable and insolent and his work becomes very sloppy. It is implied, but never stated, that Turkey's lunch hour is spent drinking alcohol.

Bartleby, the Scrivener: Introduction

"Bartleby, the Scrivener"

Herman Melville

The following entry presents criticism of Melville's short story, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" (1853). See also, *Redburn: His First Voyage* Criticism, *Pierre, or, The Ambiguities* Criticism, and "Benito Cereno" Criticism.

The account of a young man's inability to conform to business life on Wall Street in the mid-nineteenth century, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is hailed by some scholars as the first modern American short story for its break with the dense moralizing, overt allegorizing, romantic characterization, and strict form of more traditional tales. The symbolic suggestiveness and narrative ambiguity of "Bartleby" has garnered it more critical attention than any of Melville's other short stories.

Plot and Major Characters

"Bartleby, the Scrivener" is narrated by a Wall Street lawyer who deals in investment opportunities for wealthy clients. The narrator hires a man named Bartleby as a scrivener, a clerk who copies legal documents. Bartleby works diligently at first but gradually begins to decline his responsibilities with the statement "I would prefer not to." Bartleby eventually stops working entirely and stares at the wall immediately outside of a window in the law office. Only when clients are unnerved by Bartleby's idiosyncratic behavior does the narrator take significant action; he moves his business to another building rather than forcefully remove Bartleby, who "would prefer not to" quit the lawyer's service. Bartleby then refuses to leave the vacated building and is consequently jailed for vagrancy. The narrator, feeling somehow responsible for Bartleby's condition and incarceration, visits Bartleby, whom he finds dead from self-imposed starvation. At the conclusion of the story, the narrator relates a rumor about Bartleby's previous occupation: employment in the postal service's dead-letter office, the final repository of lost or otherwise undeliverable mail.

Major Themes

Much of the story's complexity originates from the limited perspective of the narrator, who reveals much about himself while he relates the few facts known about Bartleby. As a result, differing and sometimes conflicting interpretations have been advanced. Some critics focus on the narrator, variously characterizing

him as self-serving or well-meaning. Others have examined Bartleby, who they perceive as comical, nihilistic, Christ-like, or devoid of a social persona. Bartleby is most commonly identified as emblematic/symbolic of the writer alienated by society for his refusal to "copy" the formulas of popular fiction; many critics contend that Melville intended "Bartleby" to be autobiographical in this respect. Other commentators, focusing on the bleak mood and tragic conclusion of the story, consider the story a condemnation of capitalist society or a disheartening existentialist commentary. Others interpret the story as a satire of specific individuals, a parable about failed Christian charity, or an explication of contemporary philosophies. Another influential school of critics approach "Bartleby" from a psychoanalytic perspective, diagnosing Bartleby as schizophrenic, compulsive neurotic, manic depressive, or autistic.

Critical Reception

"Bartleby, the Scrivener" was Melville's first published short story. Out of financial need, he contributed stories and sketches to popular magazines throughout the mid-1850s; his previously published novels, including *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, were favorably reviewed but earned him little income. Melville's short fiction received scant critical or popular attention until the novella *Billy Budd*, left in manuscript at his death, was published in 1924. Its appearance sparked critical attention that revived interest in the Melville canon. Since then, "Bartleby" has attracted a particularly extensive collection of criticism.

Criticism: Mordecai Marcus (essay date 1962)

SOURCE: "Melville's Bartleby as Psychological Double," in *College English*, Vol. 23, No. 5, February, 1962, pp. 365-68.

[*Marcus is an American poet, critic, and educator who has written extensively on nineteenth-century American writers. In the following essay, Marcus insists that Bartleby represents the narrator's own protests against the impersonality of Wall Street.*]

Most interpreters of Melville's haunting story "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853) have seen it as a somewhat allegorical comment on Melville's plight as a writer after the publication of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*.

Others have suggested that the story dramatizes the conflict between absolutism and free will in its protagonist, that it shows the destructive power of irrationality or that it criticizes the sterility and impersonality of a business society. The last of these interpretations seems to me the most accurate, and the others suffer either from an inability to adjust the parts of the story to Melville's experience (or that of any serious writer), or to adjust the parts to one another.

I believe that the character of Bartleby is a psychological double for the story's nameless lawyer-narrator, and that the story's criticism of a sterile and impersonal society can best be clarified by investigation of this role. Melville's use of psychological doubles in *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Pierre* has been widely and convincingly discussed. Probably Melville's most effective double is Fedallah, Ahab's shadowy, compulsive, and despairing counterpart. Bartleby's role and significance as a double remain less evident than Fedallah's, for the lawyer is less clearly a divided person than is Ahab, and Bartleby's role as double involves a complex ambiguity. Bartleby appears to the lawyer chiefly to remind him of the inadequacies, the sterile routine, of his world.

Evidence that Bartleby is a psychological double for the lawyer-narrator is diffused throughout the story, in details about Bartleby and in the lawyer's obsessive concern with and for Bartleby. The fact that Bartleby has no history, as we learn at the beginning of the story and in a later dialogue, suggests that he has emerged from the lawyer's mind. He never leaves the lawyer's offices and he subsists on virtually nothing. After he refuses to work any longer, he becomes a kind of parasite on the lawyer, but the exact nature of his dependence on the

lawyer remains mysteriously vague. His persistent refusal to leave despite all inducements and threats implies that he cannot leave, that it is his role in life not to leave the lawyer's establishment. Bartleby's compulsive way of life, calm determination, and otherwise inexplicable tenacity suggest that he is an embodiment of the kind of perverse determination we might expect to flower in the rather gentle and humane lawyer should he give over to an unyielding passivity as a protest against his way of life.

The behavior of the lawyer gives stronger evidence that Bartleby is his psychological double. The screen which the lawyer places around Bartleby's desk to "isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice" so that "privacy and society were conjoined" symbolizes the lawyer's compartmentalization of the unconscious forces which Bartleby represents. Nevertheless, Bartleby's power over the lawyer quickly grows as the story progresses, and it grows at least partially in proportion to Bartleby's increasingly infuriating behavior. Towards the beginning of the story the lawyer feels vaguely that "all the justice and all the reason" may lie with Bartleby's astonishing refusal to check his copy. Later the lawyer confesses to being "almost sorry for my brilliant success" when he thinks he has succeeded in evicting the now wholly passive Bartleby; and when he finds that he is mistaken, he admits that Bartleby has a "wondrous ascendancy" over him. Growing used to Bartleby's amazing tenacity, he feels that Bartleby has been "billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence," and he muses about Bartleby: "I never feel so private as when I know you are here."

The lawyer finally accepts Bartleby's presence as a natural part of his world, and he admits that without outside interference their strange relationship might have continued indefinitely. But the crisis of the story arrives when his professional friends criticize him for harboring Bartleby and thus lead him to his various struggles to be rid of him. The professional friends represent the rationality of the "normal" social world, an external force which recalls the lawyer from his tentative acceptance of the voice of apparent unreason represented by Bartleby. When he finally resorts to moving out of his offices in order to leave Bartleby behind, he declares "Strange to say—I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of."

The lawyer's intermittently vindictive responses to Bartleby's passivity, which are combined with acceptance of and submission to Bartleby, suggest an anger against a force which has invaded himself. The last action which suggests identification of the two occurs when in the prison yard Bartleby behaves as if the lawyer is responsible for his imprisonment and perhaps for his hopeless human situation as well.

Bartleby's role as a psychological double is to criticize the sterility, impersonality, and mechanical adjustments of the world which the lawyer inhabits. The setting on Wall Street indicates that the characters are in a kind of prison, walled off from the world. The lawyer's position as Master of Chancery suggests the endless routine of courts of equity and the difficulty of finding equity in life. The lawyer's easygoing detachment—he calls himself an "eminently safe man"—represents an attempt at a calm adjustment to the Wall Street world, an adjustment which is threatened by Bartleby's implicit, and also calm, criticism of its endless and sterile routine. Although the humaneness of the lawyer may weaken his symbolic role as a man of Wall Street, it does make him a person to whom the unconscious insights represented by Bartleby might arrive, and who would sympathize with and almost, in a limited sense, yield to Bartleby.

The frustrating sterility and monotony of the world which Bartleby enters is further shown in the portraits of the lawyer's two eccentric scribes, Turkey and Nippers. These men display grotesque adjustments to and comically eccentric protests against the Wall Street world. Both of them are frustrated by their existences. Turkey spends most of his money for liquor, imbibing heavily at lunch-time, presumably to induce a false blaze of life which will help him to endure but which makes him useless for work during each afternoon. Nippers, on the other hand, needs no artificial stimulant; he possesses a crude radiance of his own, and in the mornings is "charged ... with an irritable brandy-like disposition," but at this time of day his work is poor. Nippers can get through life in the office only with the aid of endless re-adjustments of his writing table; no matter how he places it, he is still uncomfortable. Both of these men are least serviceable when they are, in a

sense, most alive. Turkey and Nippers combine automaton behavior, self-narcosis, and awkward attempts to preserve their individuality.

Entering this world of mildly smug self-satisfaction and mechanical behavior, Bartleby begins his work eagerly, "as if long famishing for something to copy." This action probably represents both a hunger for life and a desperate attempt to deaden his sensibilities among such sterile surroundings. Very soon, however, Bartleby evinces the first of his many refusals: he will not help to verify his copy against the original. Apparently Bartleby is willing to act within the lawyer's world, but he refuses all personal contact because it is spurious. His refusal is paradoxical, for he rejects the illusion of personality in an impersonal world by retreating to another kind of impersonality which alone makes that world endurable. His insistence that he "prefers not" to conform reflects both his gentleness and the profundity of his rejection of impersonality masking itself as personal contact. As such, it appropriately represents a voice deep within the lawyer himself, a desire to give over his mode of life. As the story progresses, Bartleby rejects all activity and refuses to leave; he has discovered that impersonality is not enough to help him endure this world. Bartleby clings to the lawyer because he represents a continuing protest within the lawyer's mind, whom he makes "stagger in his own plainest faith."

As Bartleby's passivity picks up momentum, he moves from the impersonality of copying to the impersonality of contemplating the dead, blind wall which fronts the window near his desk. This wall, and the prison walls "of amazing thickness" at the base of which Bartleby finally lies dead, parallel the images of the whale as "that wall shoved near to me" (Chapter 36) and of the whale's head as a "dead, blind wall" (Chapters 76 and 125) in *Moby-Dick*. Noting this parallel [in his "Melville's Parable of the Walls"], Leo Marx takes these images to represent the wall of death. I believe, however, that in both story and novel, they represent chiefly the terror and implacability of existence, against which Ahab actively and Bartleby passively revolt. Both men suggest that, in Ahab's words, "The dead, blind wall butts all inquiring heads at last" (Chapter 125). The wall may also symbolize those limitations which give every individual his personal identity, for Ahab's unwillingness to accept his limitations as a suffering man motivates his vindictive drive to pierce the wall.

The parallel between another image in "Bartleby" and a significant symbol in *Moby-Dick* adds to the likelihood that Bartleby represents a force in the lawyer's unconscious mind: Bartleby, "like the last column of some ruined temple ... remained standing mute and solitary in the middle of the otherwise deserted room." This passage resembles a series of remarkable images which symbolize the unconscious part of Ahab: "those vast Roman halls of Thermes," where man's "awful essence sits ... like a Caryatid ... upholding on his frozen brow the piled entablature of ages" (Chapter 41).

The wall in "Bartleby" symbolizes the human condition in the society within which Bartleby feels trapped, and by extension the burden of his own identity within the limitations of such a society. The lawyer's establishment on Wall Street, and the wall which is ten feet from his window (Bartleby's is three feet from his), suggest his slighter awareness of his trapped human condition. When at the end Bartleby lies dead within the prison walls "of amazing thickness," he has succumbed to the impersonality of his society and to his inability to resist it actively. His assuming the foetal position in death, "his knees drawn up, and lying on his side, his head touching the cold stones," suggesting a passive retreat to the womb, seems the opposite of Ahab's desire to be a superman who will pierce the wall of limitations and identity.

However, the symbol of the prison walls is complicated by the appearance within them of a green turf and by the lawyer's exclamation to Bartleby, within the prison, "There is the sky, and here is the grass." These images of grass symbolize the creative possibilities of life. Bartleby's response to the lawyer's declaration is, "I know where I am," which is an accusation that the lawyer is responsible for Bartleby's incarceration in the prison of the world. The lawyer's sensitivity to both the validity of Bartleby's general protest and to the creative possibilities which it neglects indicates, I believe, that Bartleby represents a protest within the lawyer which has at least partially taken the form of a death drive. Parallel to this paradox is the fact that Bartleby's protest

also resembles the protests of Turkey and Nippers, who combine self-effacement, self-assertion, and self-narcosis.

The concluding section of the story in which the lawyer seeks for a rational explanation of Bartleby's actions by reporting a rumor that he had worked in the dead letter office in Washington and so had become obsessed with human loneliness seems to me an artificial conclusion tacked on as a concession to popular taste. The lawyer's otherwise final statement that Bartleby lies asleep "with kings and counselors" is probably the story's authentic conclusion, for—despite the hopelessness of Bartleby's position—it attributes profundity and dignity to Bartleby's protest against the sterility of a spiritless society.

Melville, however, appears to intend further metaphysical speculation. The embodiment of a protest against sterility and impersonality in the passive and finally death-seeking Bartleby may suggest that man is hopelessly trapped by the human condition in an acquisitive society. Thus the lawyer may feel wisdom in Bartleby's final resignation as well as in his protest. The situation, however, is complicated by the likelihood that Bartleby appears as a protest within the lawyer's mind against his way of life, but this protest leads to death, and only the lawyer perceives the creative possibilities that Bartleby ignores.

I do not believe, however, that Melville was suggesting that the lawyer's way of life contained promises of creativity which Bartleby could not see. Rather he was suggesting the negative course which impulses represented by Bartleby might take, particularly when they emerge in a rather thoroughly sterile environment. Thus the story lacks a thematic resolution. Its conclusion creates not so much a counter-criticism of Bartleby's passivity as an expression of quiet despair about the human predicament. The lawyer is not visibly changed after a struggle with his double, as are Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov or Conrad's young sea captain in "The Secret Sharer." Neither does he succumb to an intense and destructive despair, although Bartleby has partially represented a subliminal death drive within him. However, the standstill to which the lawyer's insights have brought him does show Melville's imagination moving in the direction of the intense despair found in much contemporary literature.

Criticism: Harold Kaplan (essay date 1972)

SOURCE: "Melville: 'One Royal Mantle of Humanity'," in *Democratic Humanism and American Literature*, The University of Chicago Press, 1972, pp. 159-97.

[*Kaplan is an American poet and critic. In the following excerpt, Kaplan explores the metaphysical implications of "Bartleby" by comparing Bartleby and Moby Dick 's Captain Ahab.*]

It would be plausible to read "Bartleby the Scrivener" as social criticism; the setting is Wall Street and the man is the palest of the imprisoned office clerks who could symbolize human alienation in modern bureaucratic and technological society. But most would agree that this would be as limited a reading as the same emphasis would be for Kafka. It has been reported by several critics, chief among them Lionel Trilling and Richard Chase, that American writers of the classic period had little interest in social realism, the depiction of life styles and manners, the analysis of specific social conflicts. The mistake, as I have said elsewhere, is to extend this judgment too far, in suggesting that the theme of their work is not man in society. This is precisely the most actively considered theme of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman, but they write in terms of the *first* questions which associate with this theme and not the last. That is to say they write as if the problem of living in society had just been offered to men who were otherwise morally and intellectually complete. These were the men of the myth of America, stepping onto the soil of a new continent and preparing to establish a new society. As such they had no social experiences to describe but they did indeed have the most intense interest in the first principles of social relationships.

On the Inscrutability of "Bartleby":

It is interesting to imagine what the response of the average reader of *Putnam's Magazine* must have been when he read Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" in the November and December issues of 1853. He had little preparation for it, as it is a piece of fiction unlike any other he was likely to read in the contemporary periodicals... It is one of those few stories in English, or any other language, which will continue to defy any definitive or generally satisfactory explication, and this may finally be its theme, of course—that the inscrutable does not yield one iota to the rational categories of existence.

My guess is that there will be no last word on this minor masterpiece, because Bartleby will continue to affirm his negative preference for another 125 years in the face of all efforts to fix him in a formulated phrase.

M. Thomas Inge, in a preface to Bartleby the Inscrutable: A Collection of Commentary on Herman Melville's Tale "Bartleby the Scrivener," Archon Books, 1979.

In this respect "Bartleby" is as much a legend for the primordial stages of human intercourse as Moby Dick, and as much as the latter its "social" theme is deeply intermixed with the metaphysical. This is true despite the fact that the scene is not the high seas and the personages are not the great beasts of nature and man in an atavistic contest with them. Bartleby is best understood as an inverted Captain Ahab; crushed into a small office space and now entirely deprived of either the will or the freedom to act, he nevertheless faces the same metaphysical wall or barrier to human freedom. Bartleby has lost more than a leg; he is barely left alive, but he is still capable of a muted, frozen rebellion. His inertia is as stubborn as Ahab's exertion; he won't be moved, he won't work, he won't be helped. "I would prefer not to," replaces "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me," but it is reasonable to see the parallel.

Certainly Ahab, after his address to the "Carpenter-God," would understand the hints of a grim education which Bartleby received working for the Dead-Letter Office. Those letters which never reach their destination are the chorus for another Job-like reproach, and Bartleby makes it, facing the wall outside the office window, and the wall of his prison as he dies. The prison is almost a melodramatic postscript to a life whose main feature is empty and pointless routine. Bartleby's world seems to have been ordained by a master whose intentions or interests are best characterized by the dry unreadable jargonized legal documents which Bartleby has been set to *copy* for the duration of his life. His home, it appears, is only that barren office in which his duties are performed. Anticipating his use of Captain Vere in *Billy Budd*, Melville puts special significance into the role of Bartleby's employer, the lawyer and original author of the documents. Like Vere he is a kind of surrogate god or providence who is nonplussed by his own creature, man. He says now and then, to cover his confusion and his random sense of guilt, that despite this or despite that, he found Bartleby "a useful man to me." That remains until Bartleby's refusals are complete and he must forcibly evict him. (It is characteristic for Melville to add another touch. The lawyer is a Master of Chancery, a sinecure position with no meaning or function, but he is quite resentful because it is about to be abolished.)

When Bartleby's refusals begin, it is with the small step of refusing to read what he has written. This actually may be the crucial point of his rebellion for he is thus exposing the possibility that the world's document is meaningless. Copying it would be something like an act of automatic life, like breathing or eating, but it does not pay much honor to the draft.

The subtlety of Bartleby's defiance lies in the effect of indicting his master and his fate. He will die in the principle by which he has been forced to live. Life faces a dead wall; he will do so. Man is a mechanically driven creature; he will be so. And yet finally he must say no, like Ahab. Again he is more subtle than Ahab. "I would prefer not to" is a reduction of the will past hopelessness to inarticulate passive resistance. "He was a

man of preferences rather than assumptions."

In the walled space of his existence, *Bartleby*, like Ahab, preserves a salient dignity. When the lawyer interrupts him in the early morning, he sends him away until he can dress and put away the meager personal articles in the bedroom-office. "I am occupied," he says. In his silence as well as his refusals, he keeps his independent though empty being.

But yet he does cling to the lawyer's premises, and he must in the end be pulled from the scene of his desiccated life and work. He dies finally before another wall, in the New York Tombs. Even as this is said the implications are clear. So other men live in their prison of life and the inhospitable universe. But more directly he means to haunt the lawyer's remorse. His protesting spirit seems to demand something from men and God, the more terribly as it seems unreasonable, silent, and stubborn. He has already understood the negatives of the Dead-Letter Office, but still he remains in his metaphysical prison, like the shadow in some universal conscience. "I know where I am," he says finally, peered at, from the jail windows, by "murderers and thieves."

"He's asleep, ain't he?"

"With kings and counselors."

"*Bartleby*" has a major role to play in the understanding of Melville's richest, sustained theme. Reflection at this point would show the sharp contrast but also the significant affinity with the later portrait of *Billy Budd*, as this in turn relates to Ahab. The pantheon in Melville's mind became complete; he had created three demigods of his fictional imagination. If we search for the stimulus we may find it in the image of "a certain tragic phase of humanity" that he found in Hawthorne's work and which he described [in a letter] as follows.

We mean the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him,—the man who, like Russia or the British Empire, declares himself a sovereign nature (in himself) amid the powers of heaven, hell, and earth. He may perish; but so long as he exists he insists upon treating with all Powers upon an equal basis. If any of those other Powers choose to withhold certain secrets, let them; that does not impair my sovereignty in myself; that does not make me tributary. And perhaps, after all, there is *no* secret.

Bartleby is best understood as an inverted Captain Ahab; crushed into a small office space and now entirely deprived of either the will or the freedom to act, he nevertheless faces the same metaphysical wall or barrier to human freedom.

—*Harold Kaplan*

These sentences, I believe, describe what was strongest in Melville's inspiration to write. With Ahab, *Bartleby*, and *Billy Budd* the sovereignty of a man is asserted against those rival powers and their secrets, and progressively in each case the secret diminishes in proportion to the increasing weight and significance of the man, until we are left finally with that sovereignty and no other.

Criticism: Daniel Stempel and Bruce M. Stillians (essay date 1972-1973)

SOURCE: "*Bartleby the Scrivener: A Parable of Pessimism*," in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 1972-73, pp. 268-82.

[In the following essay, Stempel and Stillians consider "Bartleby" to be the result of Melville's interest in Schopenhauer.]

In October 1853 a troubled Matthew Arnold explained why he had chosen to drop *Empedocles on Etna* from his new collection of poems. Certain situations, Arnold suggested, are intrinsically devoid of the power to provide "poetical enjoyment": "those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous" [*Poetical Works*]. And so, Empedocles, having chosen to leap into the crater of Etna in a fit of *weltschmerz*, was banished by the stern Victorian conscience of his creator. But the romantic pessimism which is as much a part of nineteenth-century literature as the optimistic faith in progress was not to be exorcised so easily, either from Arnold's poetry or from the work of his contemporaries.

Shortly after Arnold wrote this condemnation of the literature of futility, "Bartleby the Scrivener" appeared in two installments in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* (November-December, 1853). Through one of the ironic coincidences of literary history, Melville's story exemplifies every one of the gloomy traits which Arnold had listed as fatal to "poetic enjoyment," but nevertheless survives as a masterpiece of what Unamuno has called "the tragic sense of life." It remains an enigmatic fable, an allegory with infinite reverberations, like one of Kafka's disturbingly matter-of-fact nightmares. And, like a Kafka narrative, it seems to elude all efforts to isolate the hidden frames of reference to which the play of symbols is linked by fragmentary allusions. But the task, if difficult, is not hopeless; one can at least begin with the most relevant data of sources, milieu, and biography, and chart the structure of the allegory by working from the known to the unknown. The historical approach cannot provide an "explanation" but it can give us a point of departure for a meaningful and focused discussion. In this instance, the fact that some months before the writing of "Bartleby" the first summary of Schopenhauer's philosophy in English was published in a periodical which was readily available to Melville forces us to consider the possibility that his acquaintance with Schopenhauer's pessimism began long before he bought Schopenhauer's works in the last years of his life.

On 1 April 1853, the *Westminster Review and Foreign Quarterly Review* published a survey of Schopenhauer's works under the title of "Iconoclasm in German Philosophy." This article, written by John Oxenford, was destined to become one of the landmarks of nineteenth-century intellectual history. Not only did it introduce Schopenhauer to the English-speaking world, it also catapulted the hitherto obscure philosopher into fame in his own country. Within a month the article was translated into German and published in the *Vossische Zeitung* (Berlin). Schopenhauer, whose command of English was excellent, praised Oxenford for the fidelity of his translations of excerpts from his works and in general was delighted by the article, which attacked the German academicians for failing to recognize the genius of a philosopher who was not a professor.

The *Westminster Review*, as Hugh W. Hetherington has pointed out [in his *Melville's Reviewers*], was one of a number of British magazines which were widely circulated in the United States, often arriving by fast steamer after a two-week crossing. Melville was an avid reader of the periodical press, and it is likely that he read the *Westminster Review*, if only to see whether his books had been included in the regular survey of American writing. The *Review* had printed a brief but favorable reference to Melville's work in 1852. It is not possible to determine exactly where and when Melville picked up the April issue because the opportunities were omnipresent. In May he was in New York to see his father-in-law off to Europe and it was his custom to go to the reading room of the New York Society Library and scan the latest periodicals. Further, he could have read the April issue in Boston at the Athenaeum or even in Pittsfield.

Granted the opportunity, what about the interest? Here the evidence is so strong as to rule out the possibility that he might have simply ignored the article. On his trip to Europe in 1849 Melville traveled with George J. Adler, professor of German at New York University. Adler, whom Melville described as "Coleridgean," was

an enthusiastic student of German philosophy and lost no time in initiating his traveling companion into the mysteries of transcendental metaphysics, "Hegel, Schlegel, Kant, & c." [*Journal of a Visit to London and the Continent*]. And Melville was a far from unwilling listener as they strolled the deck talking of his favorite topics, "Fixed Fate, Free will, foreknowledge absolute" [*Journal*]. Nor did this interest wane when he returned and settled at Arrowhead. J. E. A. Smith of Pittsfield noted that after his day's work was finished Melville would join his family for "light reading—which was not so very light; as it included much less of what we commonly call 'light literature' than it did of profound reviews, abstruse philosophy in prose or verse, and the like."

In the spring and summer of 1853 Melville's personal circumstances perhaps made him more than usually receptive to any pessimistic evaluation of life. He was seeking desperately for an escape from the pressures of a career as a professional writer and finding it almost impossible to continue because of failing sight and mental strain. We can imagine, then, the strong impression which Oxenford's article must have made as Melville found his own intimations of a malignity inherent in the fabric of creation supported by Schopenhauer's metaphysics of an evil will as Kant's thing-in-itself. Even more important, Schopenhauer left one gate open in the gloomy prison of his system—he taught an ethic of total disengagement from life and its obligations, similar to that which Ishmael had sought at sea, but in Schopenhauer's philosophy carried to its ultimate and logical extreme.

Every reader of "Bartleby the Scrivener" is immediately struck by the obvious fact that Bartleby consistently avoids the use of the verb "to will" and substitutes "prefer." This eccentricity of speech first excites the curiosity of his employer and his fellow scriveners, then their wrath, and, finally, like an insidious contagion, infects their speech as well. It is the verbal symbol of that calm negation of which his employer sagely remarks, "nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance." When the narrator, testing this strange phenomenon of denial, which is totally at odds with his own experience of the relationship between master and man, asks him to go to the post office, Bartleby replies, "I would prefer not to." His employer probes for the exact meaning of this baffling statement: "You *will* not?" and receives the equally emphatic reply, "I *prefer* not." Bartleby wills nothing—he merely prefers and this is the key to his enigmatic character.

In his discussion of Schopenhauer's ethical system Oxenford points out that his scale of values culminates in an ideal individual higher than the just or good man:

Just as ignorant persons, who have a smattering knowledge of Berkeley, think that the good bishop regarded the whole world as a creation of the fancy, and that they can refute his disciples by giving them as actual (not metaphorical) rap on the knuckles, so doubtless there may be wiseacres, who will fancy that as Schopenhauer has declared the will to be the real essence of the world, and every human being a manifestation of that will, every human being is in a state of the most perfect freedom. Quite the reverse! With respect to the individual will, Schopenhauer is an absolute necessitarian, holding that the action of a certain motive on a certain character is as sure of producing a certain result, as an operation of agent upon patient in the sphere of mechanics. What may be a motive to one person may not be a motive to another, for the characters may be different; but given the character and the motive, the result is infallible. The absolute will, which lay beyond the jurisdiction of causality, has forced itself into the world of phenomena in an individual shape, and it must take the consequences, that is to say, a subjugation to that law of cause and effect by which the whole world of phenomena is governed, and which is equally potent in the discharge of a pistol and the performance of a virtuous action. The "character," which is the Idea of the human individual, just as gravitation is one of the Ideas of matter, is born with him, and cannot be altered. The knowledge of the individual may be enlarged, and consequently he may be put in a better track, by learning that his natural desires will be more gratified if he obeys the laws of society, than if he rises against them; but the character remains the same, although the cupidity which would have

made a gamester or a highwayman, may become a constituent element in an honest tradesman. Thus every man brings his own depravity into the world with him, and this is the great doctrine of original sin, as set forth by Augustine, expounded by Luther and Calvin, and applauded by Schopenhauer, who, though a free-thinker in the most complete sense of the word, is absolutely delighted with the fathers and the reformers, when they bear witness to human degradation. The world of phenomena is a delusion—a mockery; and the fact of being born into such a world is in itself an evil.

And now we may introduce Schopenhauer's ideal. The artist comes in for a large share of his respect, for he, without regard to selfish motives, contemplates the ideas which form the substrata of the world of phenomena, and reproduces them as the beautiful and the sublime. The good man, with his huge sympathy, is another estimable being; but higher still is he, who, convinced of the illusion of the world, is resolved to destroy it, as far as he is concerned, by extinguishing the will to live. Suicide will not answer this purpose. Suicide is a dislike of a particular chain of circumstances, which it endeavours to break through, but it is no alienation of the individual desires from life in general. Asceticism, that gradual extinction of all feelings that connect us with the visible world—the life of the anchorite in the Egyptian desert—of the Quietist of the time of Louis XIV.,—of the Indian Fakeer, who goes through years of self-torture,—this is the perfection of Schopenhauer. The particular theological creed under which these saints performed their austerities is a matter of trivial importance,—they are all alike in the one grand qualification of holiness; they receded from the visible world and gradually extinguished the "will to live," till death, commonly so called, came as the completion of their wishes.

In this asceticism consists the only possible freedom of the will. While acting in the world of phenomena the will becomes entangled in the law of causality, but now it recedes back to a region where that law can operate no more, and where it is consequently free. The freedom of the will is, in a word, annihilation, and this is the greatest boon that can be desired.

When Bartleby first appears, he already exhibits the stigmata of one of Schopenhauer's ascetic saints: "I can see that figure now—pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby." There is an aura of holiness about him which impresses his employer, if not his fellow clerks. And it is precisely because there is no "particular theological creed" to provide an external frame of values that the story becomes an absurd parable. The passion of Bartleby is played out against a background of comic Dickensian clerks, pompous lawyers, and all the money changers of Wall Street. His passing affects no one except himself and the narrator. The world goes on, pursuing its illusions, but Bartleby is no longer part of it, and his employer, shaken by his brief glimpse of the real nature of things, is left a much sadder and a somewhat wiser man. Thus, the structure of the tale is developed from the interaction of the narrator, the smug and comfortable attorney, and the "forlorn" Bartleby.

In the opening paragraph the narrator makes it clear that all that we can know of Bartleby is what he knows: "What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, *that* is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report, which will appear in the sequel." As a result of this deliberate restriction of viewpoint, if Bartleby is a Schopenhauerian saint, we must remember that we are looking at him through the wrong end of the telescope, through the eyes of a man to whom he is a strangely magnetic riddle of obscure motivations—at best, eccentric; at worst, mad; in any event, incomprehensible. The complacent storyteller begins by congratulating himself on his estimable character and circumstances and unknowingly reveals that he is certainly the opposite of an ascetic. He has always acted on the belief that "the easiest way of life is the best." Without too much effort, he has managed to do a "snug business" and is known as a "safe" man, prudent and methodical. He is interested only in questions of legality, not morality, as he reveals when he bemoans the abolition of the office of Master in Chancery, which he has held: "It was not a very arduous office, but very pleasantly

remunerative." He makes no mention of the fact that the remuneration usually comes from the property left to widows and orphans. In short, at the beginning of his story, the lawyer is what Oxenford describes as Schopenhauer's just man: "The just man, who is just, and nothing more, stands higher in the moral scale than the bad man, but he has not reached Schopenhauer's idea of virtue. He so far shows a sympathy with his fellow-creatures that he does not encroach upon their rights, but he is equally unwilling to go out of his way to do them any substantial good. He is a sort of man who pays his taxes and his church-rates, keeps clear of the Court of Requests and is only charitable when he has an equivalent in the shape of an honourable place in a subscription list."

When Bartleby enters the office, he is assigned a place in his employer's room behind a folding screen. His desk is close to a small window which opens on a brick wall three feet away. In this confined space, Bartleby does "an extraordinary quantity of writing," day and night, but he does it "silently, palely, mechanically," with no evidence of cheerfulness or vitality. In contrast, the copyists in the outer office are both so energetic in their own eccentric way that they seem to be driven by some demonic inner force—as indeed they are, from Schopenhauer's standpoint. After his noon meal, Turkey the Englishman becomes "altogether too energetic," is noisy, blots his pages, and exhibits "a strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity." Nippers, his American colleague, is the "victim of two evil powers—ambition and indigestion." He is possessed by another form of generalized violence—grinds his teeth, constantly adjusts his desk, and mutters maledictions under his breath.

But Bartleby copies documents—and that is all he will do. When he is asked to verify his copies, he refuses in "a singularly mild, firm voice": "I would prefer not to." He repeats this formula three times, without offering any reasons, yet maintaining his composure. His employer is at a loss: "Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have dismissed him from the premises. But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors." He senses that Bartleby is not like other men, that there is something unmoved and unmoving in Bartleby, like the pallid bust of the old Roman. In a second encounter he receives the same answer, and again the strange charisma of Bartleby restrains his employer: "With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously from my presence. But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but, in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me." The lawyer grasps the fact that this is not some arbitrary caprice, that while Bartleby feels the request is quite reasonable, he has some "paramount consideration" that takes precedence. Although he appeals to common sense by enlisting the support of other clerks, this has no more effect than his appeal to reason. Bartleby returns to his little niche, his "hermitage," as his employer now has unconsciously fallen into the habit of referring to it. He is, to use Oxenford's descriptive phrase, like "the anchorite in the Egyptian desert," an ascetic who is gradually contracting the span of his activity, withdrawing from the visible world.

Unable to cope with the remarkable behavior of Bartleby, the narrator is forced to rationalize his own inexplicable reaction in terms of his *quid pro quo* philosophy, the ethic of the just man. He pities Bartleby as an involuntary eccentric and consoles himself with the thought that his generosity will be rewarded by "laying up in my soul what will eventually prove to be a sweet morsel for my conscience." The conditions laid down by Bartleby are tacitly accepted: he copies documents, but he prefers not to do anything else, even the smallest errand. And so, for the moment, he remains secure in his hermitage.

The next crucial incident in the relationship between master and clerk comes on a Sunday morning, when the lawyer, on his way to Trinity Church, stops at his office and finds himself locked out by Bartleby. The locking out is symbolic as well as literal—what the lawyer discovers in his office will mark his passage from self-satisfaction and unconcern to a new compassion. In his usual mild-mannered way Bartleby asks his master to return after walking around the block two or three times, since he is busy and prefers not to admit him. When he returns, he discovers that Bartleby has gone, and, investigating his hermitage, he concludes that

Bartleby has been living in his little corner. It is not Bartleby's apparent poverty that strikes him with sudden horror, it is the thought of the dreadful solitude of Wall Street on a Sunday morning or at night—"an emptiness."

At this point, the just man begins to experience the unfamiliar pangs that mark the birth of a new consciousness of suffering: "For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me." The source of this new awareness is simply compassion: "The bonds of a common humanity drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam." The just man has now reached that stage of enlightenment where he can broaden his sensibility to include all mankind—he has become a good man, in the sense in which Oxenford describes him: "The good man ... is he whose heart beats with sympathy for all creatures around him, practically if not theoretically acknowledging them as manifestations of the same great Will as himself. He loves every living being, from his neighbour down to a turtle-dove...." The lawyer now sees that there is as much misery as happiness in the world and has "presentiments of strange discoveries." He seems to see Bartleby dead, "laid out, among uncaring strangers." Much as he may wish to pass off this new mood as "sad fancyings" of a "sick and silly brain," the fact remains that he, at least, can no longer play the role of an "uncaring stranger."

Opening Bartleby's desk, he finds a savings bank, knotted up in a handkerchief. This removes the one motive that, to his methodical mind, might have justified Bartleby's behavior—poverty. And the lawyer reviews that behavior: Bartleby's silence, never voluntarily broken; his long reveries before the blank wall opposite his window; his self-imprisonment in his hermitage; and his "pallid haughtiness," that totally self-possessed and deliberate withdrawal from life which not merely disarms but "awes" his employer into "a tame compliance with his eccentricities." The result of this meditation is what the narrator calls "a prudential feeling"—we remember that he has boasted that his first "grand point" is prudence. Melville's lawyer instinctively reacts as Arnold reacted in his preface to the contemplation of a situation "in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance." Like Arnold, he feels that the absolute "forlornness" of Bartleby is simply painful, not tragic:

So true it is, and so terrible, too, that up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but, in certain special cases, beyond that point it does not. They err who would assert that this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart. It rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill. To a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul be rid of it. What I saw that morning convinced me that the scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder. I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach.

While this passage is an acute and perceptive intuition of the nature of Bartleby's malady, which is metaphysical, not physical, we must keep in mind the fact that it is Bartleby who is enlightened, not his master. He has had a brief glimpse of the unbearable truth which, for the protection of ordinary men like himself, is veiled by the illusions that are necessary for the conduct of daily living. As John Oxenford remarks,

All that the liberal mind looks forward to with hope, if not with confidence—the extension of political rights, the spread of education, the brotherhood of nations, the discovery of new means of subduing stubborn nature—must be given up as a vain dream, if ever Schopenhauer's doctrine be accepted. In a word, he is a professed "Pessimist"; it is his grand result, that this is the worst of all possible worlds; nay, so utterly unsusceptible of improvement, that the best thing we can do is to get rid of it altogether, by a process which he very clearly sets forth.

Bartleby has already made the choice which initiates this process, the single free act of which man is capable, and then only through the refining process of great suffering: the denial of the will to live. This is the incurable and innate "disorder" which reflects the unspoken "paramount consideration" that inspires Bartleby's negative preferences. It opposes and negates every value which the Master in Chancery, that cheerful lover of life, cherishes. Thus, even the mere contemplation of Bartleby's passive but unfaltering withdrawal from the world stuns and repels him; it points toward a conclusion which, for him, is literally unthinkable, like the "horror" of Conrad's dying Kurtz. That morning the lawyer does not go to church: "Somehow the things I had seen disqualified me for the time for church-going."

Bartleby remains in the office, preferring to do nothing but his copying, and his employer continues to seek for new methods of drawing him back into the stream of life. But it is Bartleby who dominates the office, not his employer, who, to his dismay, finds that he and his staff are falling into the habit of using "prefer."

The lawyer resolves once more to dismiss Bartleby, but a new development offers him an opportunity to diagnose Bartleby's malady as a physical disorder, causally explicable, and therefore quite forgivable. Bartleby announces that he has "given up copying" and the lawyer, seeing that his eyes appear "dull and glazed," jumps to the conclusion that he has impaired his vision by working in poor light. Now Bartleby does nothing at all, and his presence becomes even more irritating, especially since it soon becomes obvious that his reason for giving up copying has nothing to do with his health. He is given six days notice, but mutely rejects all proposals, threats, or bribes, and remains "like the last column of some ruined temple ... standing mute and solitary in the middle of the otherwise deserted room."

The narrator, becoming more and more disturbed, is at the same time experiencing an expansion of knowledge which opens up new vistas of his own character as well as Bartleby's. He has lived in a world of reassuringly predictable cause and effect. His clerks change their moods regularly according to the clock which measures their working day. He seeks for explanations that will fit this familiar pattern of causality and is driven to metaphysical musings on predestination and free will, pondering the relationship between guilt and responsibility. He feels that like the "hapless Colt," he is capable of murdering his tormentor. "But," he goes on, "when this old Adam of resentment rose in me and tempted me concerning Bartleby, I grappled and threw him. How? Why, by simply recalling the divine injunction: 'A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.' Yes, it was this that saved me." His motive may be the same as Colt's but his character is different. Although he still comforts himself with the just man's maxims of enlightened self-interest, it is clear that he is, at heart, a good man, and that Bartleby's "holiness" has touched him deeply, bringing to the surface that deep love for others which is characteristic of this ethical genotype.

Nevertheless, as an "eminently safe man," the narrator finds comfort in reading explanations that stress strict causality and deny human freedom, "Edwards on the Will" and "Priestley on Necessity," and comes to the conclusion that all of this has been fated by an "all-wise Providence" and that to shelter Bartleby is "the predestined purpose of my life." Between the narrator and Bartleby lies the insurmountable barrier that divides necessity from freedom, illusion from reality. Edwards specifically refutes Locke's distinction between "prefer" and "will"; Joseph Priestley uses the two words without noting any difference. Both insist on absolute determinism; they deny that the chain of cause and effect can be broken by any act of the will. Schopenhauer, however, as Oxenford points out, teaches that there is one free decision, limited to those few who can understand the nature of life and renounce it: "In this asceticism consists the only possible freedom of the will." Bartleby's negative preferences are not acts of willing—they are acts of not-willing.

As in a medieval morality play, the narrator is torn between good and evil impulses; his compassion for Bartleby conflicts with his attachment to the world of illusion, Wall Street. He cannot oust Bartleby, for that is a cruelty that he will not inflict on a "helpless creature," and yet he cannot let him remain in his office and ruin his professional reputation. He resolves to leave Bartleby where he is and move his office elsewhere, but, curiously, he finds it difficult to part from the man whom he is fleeing.

Having shifted the responsibility for Bartleby's shelter to someone less tenderhearted, he finds that Bartleby has indeed been evicted from his hermitage, but haunts the building day and night. Finally confronting Bartleby he reduces the situation to its bare logical bones: "Now one of two things must take place. Either you must do something or something must be done to you." He suggests a number of possible occupations to all of which Bartleby is indifferent. Baffled, he even offers to take Bartleby to his home until he can arrive at some decision, but Bartleby replies, "No, at present I would prefer not to make any change at all." This answer, which defies all the logic of law and hardheaded finance, the courts and Wall Street, causes the narrator to flee again, fearing the anger of the landlord and the new tenants. But Bartleby in his own fashion is quite consistent; he is narrowing down the circle of his actions until he reaches the center, the "still point of the turning world," and ceases to exist.

Melville's parable of the Schopenhauerian saint in a depraved world reaches its climax in the Tombs, the prison in which Bartleby is confined after being arrested for vagrancy. His former employer, who has not deserted him after all, finds him in his usual position, his face turned toward a high wall in complete indifference, "while all around, from the narrow slits of the jail windows, I thought I saw peering out upon him the eyes of murderers and thieves." It is in this symbolic isolation that Bartleby states his last negative preference, "I prefer not to dine today," and slips away quietly from life into "annihilation," free of all will and all pain.

The epilogue to the tale is that "vague report" which the narrator mentions in his opening paragraph. Bartleby, it seems, was a clerk in the Dead Letter Office, and his employer muses over the possibility that, given Bartleby's character, "by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness," nothing could have been worse for him than the opening and destruction of letters which have not been delivered but "on errands of life ... speed to death."

But this epilogue, supplied as an "explanation" of Bartleby's tragic decline, fails like every other rational explanation offered by the narrator. It tells us nothing of real importance about Bartleby, but it does indicate that a deep and irreversible change has taken place in the narrator. Actually, the safe man, the successful lawyer, is far more complex than the enigmatic Bartleby. When one grasps the significance of the end toward which Bartleby is moving, his course appears ruthlessly linear. Having made the one free decision of which any man is capable, the choice of the extinction of the will to live, he allows nothing to turn him aside. In contrast, the narrator wavers, torn by an inner conflict. For him Bartleby represents a negation of values which he has never questioned, the values of his social group, and, more important, the value of existence itself. On the one side, native shrewdness and a prudent selfishness counsel that there must be a reasonable explanation for Bartleby's martyrdom; on the other, a still small voice cries out from the depths that suffering and existence are one and the same, that all men share Bartleby's pain, if not his wisdom.

The symbol of the dead letters is ambivalent precisely because it serves as the focus for this inner conflict in the closing paragraphs. What can be more depressing, the narrator wonders, than to open these letters which bring hope and relief and have never reached their destinations? This seems reasonable until the reader asks why, to be completely rational about the matter, the narrator does not seem to be aware that dead letters may contain bad news as well as good and that a clerk in the Dead Letter Office might spend much of his time disposing of unpaid bills! It is evident that Melville has deliberately emphasized one aspect of his analogy and suppressed the other in order to move the symbol of the dead letter out of the realm of normal everyday probability and into the realm of theology—or atheology. These letters, like the long-awaited blessing of grace which releases man from the slavery of his own will, never arrive. And so, despite his turning up of a "reason" for Bartleby's defection from life, the narrator concludes his story with a double sigh, "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" That deep intuitive compassion which Bartleby has stirred in him testifies against all reason that Bartleby's fate is man's fate.

In 1856 Melville visited Hawthorne in England and spent several days with him at Southport. "Melville," Hawthorne noted in his journal, "as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had 'pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated'; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief." Hawthorne also noted that Melville had been afflicted with neuralgic complaints in the head and limbs and that "his writings, for a long while past, have indicated a morbid state of mind." He seemed to Hawthorne "a little paler and a little sadder."

Perhaps "Bartleby the Scrivener" was the journal of a descent into that valley of the shadow which Schopenhauer had charted for the nineteenth century, a metaphysical desert in which so many perished. "It is strange how he persists," Hawthorne mused, "and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting."

Criticism: Morton Kaplan and Robert Kloss (essay date 1973)

SOURCE: "Fantasy of Passivity: Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*," in *The Unspoken Motive: A Guide to Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*, The Free Press, 1973, pp. 63-79.

[In the following excerpt, Kaplan and Kloss insist that *Bartleby* exhibits symptoms of manic-depression, and contend that the narrator's veneer of passivity is a neurotic attempt to repress underlying impulses toward aggression and violence.]

Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" is a work of comic irony comparable to such novels as Ford's *The Good Soldier* or Durrell's *Justine*, both of which use the device of fallible narrator. In *The Good Soldier*, for instance, Dowell is an unperceptive, sentimental, sexually impotent man, married to an immoral sensualist. The focus of the novel is not the inevitable failure of the marriage, but the very efforts of this man—who has never felt toward his wife "the beginnings of a trace of what is called the sex instinct"—to comprehend and describe that failure. So long as he cannot acknowledge the importance of sexuality in human relationships his narrative vision is corrupted, and that is the whole point of the story....

Melville's narrator is no less enmeshed in an effort to explain events beyond his comprehension. And the manner in which the author enables us to understand both the causes and the extent of that limitation rivals the full artistry of Ford's achievement.

"I am," this narrator writes, "a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best." This belief, he tells us, has made him a certain kind of unambitious lawyer, one who can "in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds." And for thirty years he allows nothing to invade this peace—until he hires the scrivener Bartleby. The conflict which follows seems on the surface no more than an obscure antagonism in a Wall Street office, between the narrator and an employee who will not work. But in fact they collide with a force as intense as any which may bedevil two men. With precise accuracy, Bartleby undermines the tenuous code by which this lawyer has lived. The narrator's passivity, prudence, and life-long obsession with safety are all challenged with uncanny success. And as he continues to describe these events, he never suspects the nature of the role he himself has played.

The main character of the story (or so the narrator believes) is Bartleby, a pale, silent scrivener who comes in to his employ. At first Bartleby does an extraordinary amount of writing, but he refuses to do any other work, objecting each time with the incongruous remark that he "would prefer not to." Angry and astonished at this

challenge to his authority, the narrator nevertheless allows Bartleby to remain, because of his ceaseless industry as copyist. But as the days follow, the complete oddity of the man becomes apparent. He lives at night in the office, associates with no one, never speaks except to answer (and not always then), never leaves the office, eats nothing but ginger nuts, and with increasing frequency stands unmoving, either in the center of the room or looking out the window at a "dead brick wall." At last the scrivener declares he will do no further work of any kind. When the narrator concludes that Bartleby is the victim of an incurable disorder and fires him at last, he finds that Bartleby would prefer not to be dismissed and would prefer not to leave the office.

Even under these conditions, the narrator allows Bartleby to remain, thinking that to do so is an act of charity and a service to God. But when his clients and colleagues all begin to talk about the strange, immobile apparition in his office, the narrator can tolerate Bartleby no longer. Unable to simply put him out, the lawyer himself moves, locating his office elsewhere. For a time Bartleby is still successful in refusing to change his life. Turned out of the office by the landlord and the new tenant, he haunts the building, "sitting upon the banisters of the stairs by day, and sleeping in the entry by night." In order to avoid any publicity, the narrator now tries to persuade the scrivener to find a new job, and even to come home with him until a job can be found. But Bartleby refuses in his usual manner, and at last is taken to prison as a vagrant. There, emaciated by his refusal to eat, he stares at a dead-wall in the yard, and finally dies in a foetal position at its base.

The narrator ends his story with what he calls a "suggestive rumor," that Bartleby once worked in a dead-letter office. "Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness," he concludes, "can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames?" But this is a maudlin view of Bartleby's character. The thought that there is a faulty communication among men may cause distress, but not madness. The world is full of grave-diggers, hangmen, and asylum attendants, who do not become Bartlebys. The narrator errs, and ascribes a factitious cause to Bartleby's derangement, because he fails to see the motivation behind such bizarre and self-destructive behavior. We can well understand why it is difficult enough to perceive the motivation implicit in *neurotic* behavior; and Bartleby's derangement, by almost any standards a psychosis, all the more completely masks the underlying motivation which directs him to his dead-wall reveries. The narrator has, in addition, his own reasons for misconstruing Bartleby's purposes. But if we take our cue from the psychoanalytic view, specifically of a manic-depressive psychosis, much in the text will support this understanding of the man.

Bartleby's disorder may be termed a psychosis because his surrender to symptoms is so complete that he breaks with reality. He makes no effort whatever to communicate with others, to end his depression, or break out of his immobile stupor—in short, no effort to comply with basic needs, including the need to eat. So complete is his submission that we have no reason to believe he is aware that anything is wrong. His comment, that he would prefer not to work, is like a later remark, when he is emaciated to the point of death, that he would prefer not to eat dinners. The language is rationally put, but the sense is bizarre and alien to rational goals. He speaks of "preferences," but no alternatives seem possible to him. Such behavior conforms with that of the manic-depressive. [In his "Manic-depressive Psychosis",] Silvano Arieti's description of the depressive stupor of this disorder seems almost to have been written as a portrait of Bartleby:

Depressive stupor is the most pronounced form of depression. Here there is more than retardation: the movements are definitely inhibited or suppressed. The patients are so absorbed in their own pervading feeling of depression that they cannot focus their attention on their surroundings. They do not seem to hear; they do not respond. They are mute, with the exception of some occasional utterances. Since they cannot focus on anything, they give the impression of being apathetic, whereas they are actually the prey of a deep, disturbing emotion. These patients cannot take care of themselves. Generally, they lie in bed mute, and have to be spoon-fed.

Unless they are successfully treated during the attack, physical health may suffer severely. They lose up to a hundred pounds in certain cases....

This description accords well with Bartleby's immobility, apathy, and helplessness. But the only clue it offers to the inner motivation of the man is the comment that beneath the depression is disturbing emotion. But, we may ask, what is the nature of an emotion so uncompromising that it renders him incapable of both sanity and life? The basis for an answer is given in various ways by the story itself. Bartleby, after all, has an extraordinary effect on the small world in which he lives. If we dismiss his passivity as simply a crazed negation of life, we miss the fact that in his own bizarre fashion he achieves a great deal. If we look, in fact, with a disinterested eye at the towering strength with which he refuses to comply with the demands of his world, and at the shattering effect he has on the man who represents that world to him, we will find he achieves an absolute "adjustment" on his own terms. Like a fallen Satan, Bartleby gives up one world to reign in another. The choice may be an insane one, but it is not without its own motivation.

The keynote to Bartleby's psychology is given in a superb description of the underlying dynamics of depressive behavior, by Walter Bonime. Dr. Bonime writes out of a psychoanalytic practice with depressives and with a theoretical orientation well-defined and fruitful. He points out that the psychotic person exhibits crucial attributes also found in the neurotic—specifically, that both are engaged in purposive behavior and that those purposes are best understood in the context of their social action. [In his "The Psychodynamics of Neurotic Depression,"] he offers a description of the depressive individual that brings us directly to the motives of the scrivener:

... the depressive is an extremely manipulative individual who, by helplessness, sadness, seductiveness, and other means, maneuvers people toward the fulfillment of demands for various forms of emotionally comforting response. The emotional and behavioral corollary to this extreme manipulateness is an almost allergic sensitivity to being influenced; this engenders forms of elusiveness manifested in helplessness, withdrawal, physical and mental retardation, manic behavior, stubbornness, irresponsibility, unproductive preoccupying activities, and various types of failure and self-destruction.

The manipulateness of the depressive is the most significant fact of this description. Behind apparent apathy there is purposive action. The man who "would prefer" to do nothing, on the contrary, indulges in the power to frustrate. It is a grim battle in which the depressive spares himself least of all. Dr. Bonime vividly describes this tenacity in terms which again bring Bartleby directly to mind:

The depressive is determined to prevail, to win in every interpersonal encounter. For him life is a battle—with individuals and with fate. He is going to get what he wants, and he is not going to be forced to exert himself responsibly in pursuit of a more realistic goal.... He will sacrifice some or all of his potentials for living, but in his subjective, distorted, competitive emotional orientation he will nevertheless be victorious.

In the competitive world of the depressive, this rebellion is a living declaration that "Nobody's going to make me do anything, nobody can force me to respond." The depressive even carries this out by escape into psychosis or suicide, in which extreme instances the process may be a charade of "You can't make me live on your terms," or "at all."

This description of the uncompromising depressive is the criterion by which to judge Bartleby. To understand how successful he is in these terms, however, we must look again at the narrator. It is in the interaction between them that Bartleby's victory is enacted. And behind the self-deceptions of the narrator's story, the force of that victory is unmistakable.

Bartleby enacts his depression in the company of an antagonist exquisitely picked. There could hardly be imagined an interlocking of disorders greater than that which exists between the narrator and his scrivener. They are as intricately joined by nature and temperament as Othello to Iago, or Mario to the magician Cipolla. The narrator has lived all his life out of the reach of conflict, evidently with amazing success. He is now confronted in Bartleby with a man who must not only be fired, but forcibly taken from his office—if not directly by him, then by the police at his command. This would seem to be a not very difficult task, even for a peaceable man. He has, after all, no other rational choice, and morality and the law are on his side. But the difficulty of the task should not be judged solely on the basis of external obstacles. One is reminded of Hamlet, the man with no compunctions about killing and with all the motivation and opportunity he needs to kill, who yet delays so long he must at last exclaim:

I do not know
Why yet I live to say "This thing's to do,"
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do't.

As the story gradually makes clear, the difficulty for Melville's narrator, as much as for Hamlet, is within the mind.

The first confrontation takes place shortly after Bartleby is hired. The scrivener has already indicated manic-depressive behavior, in the unnatural intensity of his diligence: the narrator tells us that "he did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light." And we see something of the melancholia which underlies the mania, in the narrator's observation that Bartleby "wrote on silently, palely, mechanically." But when Bartleby is asked to proofread documents—a standard part of any clerk's duties—he replies, as he invariably will, that he would prefer not to. His employer sits for a time in "perfect silence, rallying [his] stunned faculties." Understandably, and almost the last time his response to Bartleby will be so rational, he decides that either Bartleby misheard him or he misheard the reply.

He repeats his request, but Bartleby, in his unvarying way, states that he "would prefer not to." "Are you moonstruck?" the narrator asks in high excitement, striding across the room. "Moon-struck" is a fair enough appraisal of the scrivener, but the narrator has merely put the question rhetorically. It will be a considerable time, a revealingly long time, before he considers again the question of Bartleby's sanity. On this occasion, when the scrivener voices again his refusal, the lawyer returns to his desk. Now he tells himself that he would have "violently dismissed" Bartleby from the premises, were it not for his peaceable manner. He writes that he would have "as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors," and concludes that he is too hurried by business to take any corrective action.

There is something odd in all of this. The refusal of an employee to do his job should be equally objectionable in any tone of voice. And when the narrator concludes that he is hurried by business, he has in fact already retreated from Bartleby across the room to his desk. Equating his clerk with a plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero is perhaps understandable, given the scrivener's pale, inexpressive face. But to justify inaction on the basis of this resemblance seems far-fetched, even bizarre. Most curious is his comment that he would have *violently* dismissed Bartleby if the scrivener had been an ordinary man. An ordinary man can be simply told to go. If he wishes to save face because of his own passivity, we would expect him to refer to an *immediate*, not violent, dismissal.

On the second occasion that the scrivener is asked, and refuses, to proofread, the narrator responds in much the same way. He writes that he is "momentarily turned into a pillar of salt," and that with "any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously

from my presence. But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me." We note that he still imagines violence, which he refers to now as a "dreadful passion," as his only alternative to inaction. There is, in this repeated association to violence, the suggestion that he is passive with Bartleby because, for him, *any* action implies getting violent. We may recall that he has carefully shunned conflict all his life, made himself an eminently safe and prudent man and, as he puts it, suffered nothing ever to invade his peace. One wonders why such a design for living has been necessary. Perhaps, we can begin to infer, the overriding motive of his life has been a struggle to contain violence latent within him, violence needing only the smallest conflict to set it off.

If this is the case, if the "cool tranquility" of his "snug retreat" is a defense against his own murderous aggression, it becomes clear why he should so weakly suffer a clerk's challenge to his authority and why he works so hard to sustain his passivity with rationalizations. He must have the idea, however unconsciously, that were he to act in anger, he might kill the scrivener. There is a subtle measure of support for this view in his allusion to Lot's wife. He may choose the metaphor with the thought that he is himself as inert as a pillar of salt. But there is the suggestion, too, that he is paralyzed by the sight of destructive rage—not God's, but his own. He seems to sense the presence of this unconscious motivation with his comment that he is "strangely disarmed" in a "wonderful manner." "Strange" and "wonderful" often imply, as we have seen elsewhere, a sense of unconscious motivation. And the term "disarmed" itself suggests the prevention of violence.

The theme of passivity as a defense is underscored by what follows. He turns to his other employees for support, which they readily give. One of them thinks it perfectly right that Bartleby should be asked to proofread, another declares the scrivener should be "kicked" from the office, and a third thinks the scrivener is a "lunny." Theirs is the realistic and normal response, reached without effort. We see how simply the problem can be solved when no unconscious inhibition intervenes. It is revealing enough that the narrator should need their guidance in the first place, and even more so that he now ignores it, concluding once again that he is too busy to face the problem.

And so, in the following scenes, we have the picture of a man who only partially suspects the extent of his ambivalence and who alternates between extremes of anger and abject surrender. Each time he surrenders, he offers himself new grounds to justify doing so. He decides that Bartleby "means no mischief and "intends no insolence"; that his "eccentricities are involuntary"; that with a less indulgent employer Bartleby might be "driven forth miserably to starve"; and that in consequence he can get along with Bartleby notwithstanding his behavior. Finally, and by this time not surprisingly, Bartleby is permanently excused from anything he would prefer not to do—which is to say, everything but the work of copying. As the narrator tells us:

His steadiness, his freedom from all dissipation, his incessant industry (except when he chose to throw himself into a standing revery behind his screen), his great stillness, his unalterableness of demeanor under all circumstances, make him a valuable acquisition.

In short, he converts a depressed and recalcitrant clerk with tendencies to catatonic stupor into a fortunate gain for the office; a piece of legerdemain designed solely to persuade himself. His argument leaves conveniently out of account what a painful experience for him surrender has been. For instance, he writes that he "could not, for the very soul of me, avoid falling into sudden spasmodic passions with him. For it was difficult to bear in mind all the time those strange peculiarities, privileges, and unheard of exemptions ...". And, although he cannot let himself get angry, his repressed anger forces him back again and again to new confrontation. We read that "the passiveness of Bartleby sometimes irritated me. I felt strangely goaded on to encounter him in new opposition—to elicit some angry spark from him answerable to my own." He is caught between an anger he can neither effectively repress nor translate into action, so that each time he must be humiliated by the very encounter he has brought about. As he writes on one such occasion:

I staggered to my desk, and sat there in a deep study. My blind inveteracy returned. Was there any other thing in which I could procure myself to be ignominiously repulsed by this lean, penniless wight?—my hired clerk? What added thing is there, perfectly reasonable, that he will be sure to refuse to do?

That "added thing" is Bartleby's refusal, one Sunday morning, even to admit his employer into the office (Bartleby has been living there and is not yet ready to open the door). It is the ultimate degradation for the narrator, who "slinks away," in spite of "sundry twinges of impotent rebellion." He keeps repeating to himself, as he goes, that his inaction is the result of Bartleby's "wonderful mildness," but this explanation, as usual, begs the question. He never examines *why* this mildness should have such an effect on him. Even the language he uses beclouds the issue. For instance, he writes that he is "awed into a tame compliance" by the "austere reserve," of his clerk's "eccentricities." Were he to describe Bartleby's behavior more accurately as crazed and now criminal, his own situation would become intolerable. He would have to end his passivity, something he cannot do, or begin to question his own sanity, something he does not wish to do.

The insistence that it is Bartleby's mildness which is the narrator's undoing is not, however, without an element of truth. Walter Bonime's central point about the psychodynamics of depression is worth recalling in this connection: that it is a passive means to defy, manipulate, and defeat the world. The virtue of passivity is that it masks aggression under the guise of helpless suffering—a mask useful not only to prevent retaliation by the world, but to conceal from oneself, in order to allay guilt, the nature of this aggression. Bartleby's verbal formula for refusing to work is, in this light, a perfect extension of such a strategy. He uses the conciliatory word for the obstinate action.

It is one of the ironies of the story that such a transparent formula, so unlikely of success, should in fact so often succeed. Of course, this is so only because the narrator is the perfect victim, one whose inhibitions prevent him from identifying the aggression behind the mask of his clerk's passivity. He does, on one occasion, struggle with Bartleby to make him say "will not," rather than "prefer not," as though that change alone would end the ascendancy the clerk has over him. But Bartleby wins that struggle, too, as he wins all the others. Eventually, the narrator even tries to identify with his victorious clerk, as though that might erase his own ignominy. In perhaps the only comic scene in the story, however grim it may also be, the narrator catches himself using the same expression. He tells us that "somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word 'prefer' upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions." Bartleby's formula for domination has not been lost on the other employees, either; and the lawyer finds that they too are, quite unconsciously, using the expression themselves. For instance, with the employee named "Turkey":

"Oh, *prefer*? oh yes—queer word. I never use it myself. But, sir, as I was saying, if he would but

"Turkey," interrupted I, "you will please withdraw."

"Oh certainly, sir, if you prefer that I should."

They identify with Bartleby, not for his depressions, the emptiness of his life, or his isolation from the world, but because of their intuitive sense that it is all a purposeful struggle for power, a struggle they see Bartleby win each day in the office. They rightly understand he is the aggressor who seems never to get caught.

Up to now, Melville has preserved a certain dramatic ambiguity. His narrator, for all the transparency of his rationalizations, has not been without at least some measure of justification for his inaction. His clerk has done good work in copying. And we can almost sympathize with the lawyer's continued sense that so mild a man can be tolerated and, perhaps in time, even reasoned with. (Bartleby's passive suffering has its demoralizing effect on the reader, too.) In addition, the narrator often takes his submission with a light heart. There is almost something comic about the way thoughts of decisive action (by "intimating the unalterable

purpose of some terrible retribution very close at hand"), are immediately reversed ("I half intended something of the kind. But upon the whole, as it was drawing towards my dinner-hour, I thought it best to put on my hat and walk home for the day"). We might almost think that some comic resolution of the conflict is also at hand.

What does happen, however, is not in the least bit comic. The narrator recognizes, however slowly, how deranged his clerk is, with his catatonic depressions, his emaciation, his unending obstinacy. Concluding that Bartleby is the "victim of innate and incurable disorder," he decides at last to tell him that his "services were no longer required." On his first attempt, he makes the mistake of trying to reason with Bartleby, forgetting that one cannot reason with an incurable disorder. But when he has failed to voice the dismissal, he achieves his clearest sense that the problem is within himself. He tells us that "I strangely felt something superstitious knocking at my heart, and forbidding me to carry out my purpose, and denouncing me for a villain if I dared to breathe one bitter word..." The old inhibition is still in force, not permitting a word in anger. Bartleby, however, as though sensing the imminence of dismissal, fights back with his own peculiar weapons. He declares that, henceforth, he will do no further work of any kind. It would appear that this is too much, even for the narrator. As politely as possible, he tells him at last to go. True, he gives the clerk six days' notice, not the usual thing with employees who will do no work whatever. But the termination, he says, is "unconditional." The struggle, for these men, may be more against inner forces than against each other, but it is as grim and ruthless, in its way, as the shedding of blood.

When the time is up, Bartleby is, of course, still there, standing in his corner motionless. Surely something now must give, we think. There is nothing more for the clerk to refuse to do, no more threats left for the lawyer to make. Something does give, and it is that which has been increasingly compromised from the beginning—the narrator's sanity. He was able to persuade himself, once before, that Bartleby was a valuable acquisition. Now he takes one further step out of reality. He gives Bartleby severance pay, gives him instructions for locking the office and leaving the key, bids him goodbye and farewell, and walks home "pluming" himself on his "masterly management in getting rid of Bartleby." In short, he concludes the clerk will go because he, the narrator, assumes it. As he tells us, "I *assumed* the ground that depart he must; and upon that assumption built all I had to say." This is infantile belief in the omnipotence of thought, to think something will happen because one has assumed it will. But at least it is madness with a method, since he has controlled his violence—that is, the greater problem, for him, than even Bartleby. This he has achieved, and he takes consolation in it: "The beauty of my procedure," he writes, "seemed to consist in its perfect quietness. There was no vulgar bullying, no bravado of any sort, no choleric hectoring, and striding to and fro across the apartment, jerking out vehement commands...."

The next morning, however, having "slept off the fumes of vanity," he is realistic enough to wonder if his clerk has really gone. When he finds Bartleby still in the office, he is reluctant to give up his "doctrine of assumptions," as he calls it. He momentarily imagines acting as though Bartleby has really gone, pretending not to see him, and walking "straight against him as if he were air." It is crazy thinking, and he recoils from it. As if to recover his sanity, his freedom of action, and his rightful authority all at one stroke, he finally gives expression to his anger and advances on Bartleby "in a sudden passion." When Bartleby replies, as dispassionately as ever, that he would prefer not to leave, the violence which has begun to leak out can no longer be kept from consciousness, although the lawyer is still not without his defenses. He thinks of a murder committed in a business office, one which involved others, not Bartleby and himself: "I remembered the tragedy of the unfortunate Adams and the still more unfortunate Colt in the solitary office of the latter; and how poor Colt, being dreadfully incensed by Adams, and imprudently permitted himself to get wildly excited, was at unawares hurried into the fatal act..." The idea of killing is there, but the names have been changed. It is a good example of how "free" association, like dreams, reveals more than one knows.

Nothing, however, has changed. Bartleby is still there, and the narrator tries to "fancy, that in the course of the morning, at such time as might prove agreeable to him, Bartleby, of his own free accord, would emerge from

his hermitage, and take up some decided line of march in the direction of the door." As usual, the narrator's language is the rhetoric of the lawyer, blurring the outlines of his own thinking. He is, to put it bluntly, reduced to the point of merely wishing that his clerk would prefer to go. The situation is as intolerable as ever; another defense against his own anger must now be found and another step taken out of the real world. He adopts a fantasy, less rational even than the magical thinking of his "doctrine of assumptions." He decides that he has a mission, predestined from eternity, to keep and care for Bartleby! Thus he converts the ignominy of defeat into the exalted idea of a divine purpose. The humiliation of defeat, which he cannot erase at the risk of murderous violence, he dispels with a delusion of grandeur.

Such a retreat from reality is shocking and gives the full measure of how costly his inhibition has become. He writes that "gradually I slid into the persuasion that these troubles of mine, touching the scrivener, had been all predestined from eternity, and Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an allwise Providence.... At last I see it. I feel it; I penetrated to the predestinated purpose of my life. I am content." This is the contentment of an all-but psychotic delusion. We have a vivid illustration of the premise that the line between neurosis and psychosis can often not be clearly drawn. The narrator is not psychotic, but this delusion is. And we have, too, an example of how the bizarre elements of psychosis may be themselves part of the individual's efforts to save himself and his integration in the world. With this delusion, the narrator at least escapes from a hell in which he can no longer live. And he is able to conclude, with no sense of humiliation or despair: "Yes, Bartleby, stay there behind your screen.... I shall persecute you no more...."

The narrator has not run from the world altogether, and his sense of reality helps to determine his next move. He becomes worried by the fact that his professional colleagues and acquaintances begin talking about the strange creature, the apparition, standing immovable in the middle of his office. The narrator's divine purpose has not been revealed to *them*, and the lawyer's reputation and practice is threatened. The narrator also has the queer idea that Bartleby will outlive him and so gain final possession of the office! This idea we can perhaps ascribe to his inveterate equating of conflict with murderous violence. Children often have murderous thoughts against their parents with the gratifying, and seemingly innocent, thought that they will "one day" outlive them. There is no reason for the narrator to care who possesses the premises when he is dead and gone. But the fear makes sense as another defense against his own murderous wishes. We can presume that, on the point of losing his profession, his violent wishes must be at their most intense. And so he projects them onto Bartleby, and imagines the clerk will outlive him (that is, might kill him). In any case, the narrator, as is the case with any neurotic, must decide how sick he is going to be. To put it differently, he must decide how much loss of adjustment in the external world he will tolerate in the interests of resolving inner problems. The choice is not always a conscious one, but it must always be made. Deciding he will not give up his profession, he does the only thing left to do. Unable to force Bartleby to go, he packs his own bags and moves his office elsewhere.

There is an utterly poignant moment when everything is moved, and Bartleby is left motionless in the middle of the naked room. Although their lives are highly disparate, each is pursuing the dictates of inner necessity. Bartleby remains uncompromising, although now he is left with nothing, while the narrator runs from conflict, but hangs on to his profession. Bartleby, of course, is the more forlorn figure, and the lawyer, even now, feels sympathy and self-reproach for leaving. The reader, too, is likely to feel more compassion for the scrivener. But one must beware the tactics of depression. The lawyer seems to have learned the lesson, and he goes.

The remainder of the story illustrates one last fact about the neurotic. Reality sometimes protects them from realizing the full proportions of their own malady. When the new tenants find Bartleby "haunting the building generally, sitting upon the banisters of the stairs by day, and sleeping in the entry at night," the narrator is appealed to as the person responsible for having left him there. He agrees to speak to Bartleby because, as he tells himself, he might otherwise be "exposed" in the newspapers. What it is that he might be exposed for, he does not go into. It is, presumably, the old guilt born of latent violence which makes him vulnerable to intimidation. Back he goes to the old office and to more "reasoning" with Bartleby. At this point a most

extraordinary thing happens, more bizarre and incomprehensible than anything that has gone before. After failing to persuade Bartleby to leave the office (as though that were ever possible) and failing to persuade him to take up some other profession (as though that were ever the problem), the narrator invites Bartleby to come home with him: "'Bartleby,' said I, in the kindest tone I could assume under such exciting circumstances, 'will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my dwelling—and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure? Come, let us start now, right away.'"

Nothing is more certain than that, once lodged with the narrator, Bartleby will prefer to remain. And in light of his failures with the scrivener to date, he could hardly expect to have the strength to then force him to leave. Yet he tells us that this invitation is one "which had not been wholly unindulged before." One hardly knows at first what to make of this folly. It is comprehensible only as the last and most extreme gesture of defense. His leaving the office has not worked; he is back and responsible for the clerk all over again. Trapped by an unconscious guilt which makes him fear "exposure," there is nothing else to do except take up the association; but at least in the privacy of his home, away from the prying eyes of the world. And the scrivener's demented strategy of passive and depressed suffering has always had its effect on the narrator. Fortunately for the narrator, Bartleby replies: "'No: at present I would prefer not to make any change at all.'"

This obstinacy has its measure of grandeur, too. One finds such uncompromising stubbornness in the rages of the infant, where Bartleby's malady may indeed have had its origin. In any case, we shall never know the full extent of the narrator's capacity for neurotic accommodation, since, through no doing of his (he would say through no fault of his,) Bartleby is led unprotesting to the toms. The lawyer visits him there, and finds him "standing all alone in the quietest of the yards, his face towards a high wall." The narrator has another one of his revealing free-associations, imagining that "all around, from the narrow slits of the jail windows, I thought I saw peering out upon him the eyes of murderers and thieves." It takes little analysis, at this point, to perceive that he has projected again his own guilt. It is the guilt which prevented him from sending the scrivener to prison in the first place, and which now makes him feel responsible for his being there.

Bartleby, now that he is in prison, declares that he "prefers not to dine today." He always has new measures of obstinacy to refute the world. And so, when the narrator finds him later at his wall, he is "strangely huddled at the base . . . , his knees drawn up, and lying on his side, his head touching the stones." In death, his foetal position links him again to the infant. This equation between depressed obstinacy and the infant is an explanation for the sympathy and compliance such men can extort from the world. All suffering children are victims, since they have not yet the freedom to create their own problems. And so it is difficult for the reader to break the spell with the thought that Bartleby has killed himself, and with as much freedom to do otherwise as any of us possesses.

The narrator seeks at the end to explain the scrivener as the victim of his previous work in a dead letter office, which occupation fatally intensified an already "pallid hopelessness." The irony of the story is sharpest at its conclusion. At the beginning, the narrator had said that a description of himself was necessary for "an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented." But he has never understood the scrivener, beyond the dim sense that he is a "bit deranged." And attributing derangement to the effects of a dead-letter office is sentimental, and simplistic. But, above all, he does not understand that for the greater dramatization of his own inner conflicts, for his own perilous touch of madness, he himself has been the chief character. He can live in the world only as long as a passive avoidance of conflict is allowed him, and as long as anything which in the least disturbs the violence within him is kept away. Such neurotics are not often spared through an entire lifetime all conflict except the passivity of an obstinate clerk.

Criticism: Marvin Fisher (essay date 1974)

SOURCE: "'Bartleby,' Melville's Circumscribed Scrivener," in *The Southern Review*, Louisiana State University, Vol. X, No. 1, Winter, 1974, pp. 59-79.

[Fisher is an American educator whose books include *Going Under: Melville's Short Fiction and the American 1850's* (1977). In the following essay, Fisher provides an overview of several critical approaches to "Bartleby," and insists that Melville intended *Bartleby* to be representative of humankind generally.]

"Bartleby" is certainly the most familiar of Melville's short stories, reprinted in dozens of anthologies and analyzed by scores of critics. It would be hard to say something new about this early study of alienation, frustration, and catatonic withdrawal, and the surest guard against originality, I suspect, would be to take account of every commentary on the story. It would be more foolish, however, to try to clear one's mind completely of what others have written about Melville's pitiable and peculiar clerk and the initially complacent but ultimately vulnerable lawyer who narrates the tale.

This was Melville's first published short story and constitutes a remarkable attempt at a new genre and a considerable recovery from his disappointment over the public reception of *Pierre*. It was a greater recovery in terms of technical virtuosity than in the expression of a more positive outlook, especially in regard to the title character, who, we have been frequently told, confronts the dismal prospects of the aspiring American artist or writer. It was a subject which, quite understandably, never ceased to interest, attract, and challenge Melville—whether in the general terms of the nature of art, the strengths and liabilities of the artist, or the particular circumstances of the American scene. One or more phases of this complex issue are present in *Typee*, *Mardi*, *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, *Moby Dick*, *Pierre*, *The Confidence-Man*, and at least one-third of the short stories. The height of Melville's faith in what the serious writer could accomplish in America occurred in his enthusiastic review of Hawthorne's *Mosses*, but he reached the depths in *Pierre* and the two short works that followed in the early 1850s—"Bartleby" and "Cock-a-Doodle-Do!"

To approach "Bartleby" only as an analogue of the alienated artist in an insensitive society is to ignore a great deal of the contextual richness or symbolic suggestiveness of the story. The stony impersonality of urban America so prominent in the latter part of *Pierre* is compressed into the Wall Street law office setting of "Bartleby" and both stories end with the death of the title character in the steel and granite isolation of the Tombs—the would-be writer crushed by the ponderous judgments of a matter-of-fact society. In each case the title character's pathetic end is a compound of his personality (ideals, expectations, delusions, and compulsions) and the pressures of a pragmatic, profit-oriented, and apparently unsympathetic society. And in each case also, the character's psychological demise and ultimate death follows a breakdown in communication between himself and his society.

When "Bartleby" first appeared (in two installments of *Putnam's Monthly* in late 1853), the title read "Bartleby, the Scrivener. A Story of Wall-Street." The shorter form adopted later was very likely the result of typographical considerations in listing the contents of Melville's *Piazza Tales*, where all the titles are brief; and since the *Piazza Tales* has been the source of most subsequent republications of the story, the shorter title has become the more familiar. This circumstance is unfortunate because it plays down the social and economic connotations of "Wall-Street" and the degree to which Bartleby was described or identified by his employment in the original title. Melville's intention, it seems likely, was to use the extended title to emphasize the highly dramatic, actually expressionistic, Wall Street setting—a law office where the four employees are literally and figuratively *walled in* by the circumstances of their employment and by the social assumptions embodied in their employer and *walled off* from any hope of mobility or self-fulfillment by the same concept of class structure.

In a less obvious sense than in *White-Jacket*, where the United States ship *Neversink* was a man-of-war representation of an overwhelmingly hierarchical society with distinct class and caste divisions, the Wall Street office is a microcosmic representation of a simpler but similarly structured segment of American

society. To Bartleby—who secures employment as a legal copyist, a sort of animated Xerox machine duplicating the documents that reinforce and perpetuate the *status quo*—the office seems a dead-end existence, denying his unique human individuality, curtailing his freedom of choice, and corroborating his hopelessness. His withdrawal from what his employer would judge to be socially productive activity into his "dead-wall revery" is Bartleby's resentful confirmation of the gross inequities and subtle iniquities of an existence that is servile at best and imprisoning at worst. Although he somehow obtains a key to the office, Bartleby chooses to remain permanently within an enclosure with no exit, a prisoner who is also his own jailer, so that when he is imprisoned in the Tombs and surrounded by the massive walls, his condition seems changed hardly at all. To his own satisfaction—or more accurately, dissatisfaction—he has proved that democratic theory masks despotic practice, that the supposedly open society can easily be closed off by those in power, and that Christian principle can be stretched to cover exploitative sham. But Melville grants Bartleby only a measure of truth and more than a modicum of distortion and delusion. He is a character akin to Kafka's Josef K. or Gregor Samsa, but his story is not as simple as one of Kafka's grotesque allegories. Disenchanted as he often was, Melville did not yet view American society as the Amerika of some present-day critics.

Technically "Cock-a-Doodle-Do!" is a more Kafkaesque story than "Bartleby." For one thing the narrator in the former story becomes more and more subject to his hallucinatory perception of reality; whereas the narrator in "Bartleby" suffers the loss of his comforting preconceptions and brushes against an aspect of reality he could not earlier have imagined. More important perhaps, is the fact that we see nothing from Bartleby's point of view and have to guess at what ails him, both aided and hindered by the narrator's perception of Bartleby's symptoms and his interpretation of Bartleby's actions. As the narrator says in the opening paragraph, "Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and, in his case, those are very small." Despite the scarcity of sources, we are given an extensive case history of Bartleby's last days. It is provided entirely by the narrator, who is a very unlikely and somewhat unwilling evangelist. His account thus has its inherent limitations, but it is the only gospel we have and it will have to suffice.

Melville's handling of the point of view in this story is a conscious and sustained artistic achievement, an exercise in irony unprecedented in American literature. Without apparent strain he manipulated his narrator so that this well-heeled, self-satisfied source both reveals and obscures the meaning of his troubling experiences.

—Marvin Fisher

Melville's handling of the point of view in this story is a conscious and sustained artistic achievement, an exercise in irony unprecedented in American literature. Without apparent strain he manipulated his narrator so that this well-heeled, self-satisfied source both reveals and obscures the meaning of his troubling experiences. Not by any means an entirely unreliable narrator, this representative of conservative business interests is a man of realistically limited perception but capable of considerable moral growth. Melville's most telling tactic, much like that of Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn* but more subtle, is to make the narrator's language suggest far more than the character consciously realizes. Thus his attitudes, his actions and reactions, but more importantly his vocabulary, mark the meanings that his mind cannot reach and establish the three dimensions of the story.

To understand those dimensions, we are required to approach them, at least in part, from Bartleby's point of view, to approximate his perspective. The first dimension (or direction of implicative meaning) involves the concept of *community*—an ideal that is social, political, and economic. The second involves the concept of *communication*, which extends the social function into areas of literary or artistic implication. And the third involves the concept of *communion*, the significance of which is obviously spiritual or religious. These dimensions are related and partially overlap while still being distinguishable. Yet from our growing intuition of Bartleby's point of view, each seems to have held forth a glowing possibility only to have it disproved by

some impenetrable obstacle—physical, social, or metaphysical. The various walls, tangibly representing the obstacles Bartleby has found in his experience, inevitably shape his perspective and deny him any further prospect.

In American society, where promise is so great and expectation so high, Bartleby finds no place to go and no fulfillment in life. He lapses into lethargy; flouts the obligations of a work-money-property-oriented society; stubbornly asserts the negative aspects of his freedom of will; and in withdrawing from the world of social affairs and human relationships, seems to will his withdrawal from life itself. There is no clear diagnosis of what Bartleby suffers from, but there is enough evidence to construct a complex pathology, demonstrating that Melville found the sources of this condition in the character of the existing society and in the peculiar susceptibilities of the sensitive individual.

The main dimension of the story is concerned with the idea of *community*, or rather the lack of it, within the physical and social divisions of the Wall Street office. The narrator's estimate of himself and his relationship to his subordinates tells us a great deal. The possessive pronoun is prominent as he tells about "myself, my *employes*, my business, my chambers." Like the complacent lawyers in "The Paradise of Bachelors," men insulated from the troubling trials of life who used the law to right no wrongs, the narrator has sought "the cool tranquility of a snug retreat" where he can "do a snug business among rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title-deeds." He prides himself for being known as a "safe" man and for possessing such virtues as "prudence" and "method." Morality, justice, sympathy, or passion are outside his value system. He unashamedly loves money and venerates "the late John Jacob Astor," whose name becomes part of the narrator's litany "for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion." Connotatively "Astor" suggests not only wealth but in combination with "orbicular" it also suggests a heavenly sphere in which the financial luminary "Astor" is the source of light and emotive power. And the narrator is not merely a well-to-do American or a spokesman for Wall Street, he is unabashedly an idolater of the golden bull—now become the almighty dollar. His priesthood of profit and his proprietary air shape his attitude toward the men who work for him. "My *employes*" could be a way of speaking, or it could mean that they have value as means to serve my financial ends.

This tendency of the narrator to judge others by their utility to him seems to make him more tolerant of human weakness or eccentricity, but in a very damaging way it mocks the possibility of men joining in a common enterprise founded on self-respect and sympathy. He is a benevolent master of his men and an enlightened employer-exploiter. He can put up with Turkey's excessive drinking, irritability, and carelessness if the elderly clerk remains useful and productive for a predictable part of the day. (Since he pays his copyists on a piecework rate rather than a salary, he can be more tolerant of their unproductive periods). Turkey cannot be relied on in the afternoon but Nippers, the other copyist, could be counted on to do his best work then. So between them these two employees (identified like Ginger Nut, the office boy, only by the demeaning nicknames which turn them into things) produced a good day's work—a situation which the narrator accepts as "a good natural arrangement, under the circumstances." Their greatest value, their existential purpose, is their service as distinct instrumentalities and not as individual human beings.

Of the two clerks, Nippers is easily the more ambitious, impatient at the routine and menial aspects of his employment and anxious to "be rid of a scrivener's table altogether." But instead of admiring Nippers for his enterprise, the narrator calls it "his diseased ambition"; instead of praising his attempts to raise his social position, the narrator charges him with "a continual discontent." From the employer's point of view, Nippers is too uppity: he ought to know his place and accept it more graciously. Instead, he envies and in some small way assumes a few perquisites of power. These traits make him seem to his employer an insidious and even at times a satanic threat to system and authority. Yet because Nippers' eccentricities were evident only when Turkey's were not, both men remained tolerably useful to their employer.

The narrator's essentially selfish standards and the superficial values of Wall Street society underlie his description of his employees' appearances and the acceptability of their dress. He can, for example, more easily overlook Nippers' shortcomings because "he always dressed in a gentlemanly sort of way; and so, incidentally, reflected credit upon my chambers." Turkey's clothes, however, were more apt to be messy and ill-fitting, and so the narrator, in an act of self-serving charity, gave him one of his own more "respectable-looking" coats, assuming that Turkey would show his appreciation by curbing his afternoon rashness. Instead of being useful and productive and a greater credit to his employer's establishment, Turkey reacted resentfully to what his employer cannot recognize as a demeaning form of charity; and the narrator's explanation further degrades his employee: "too much oats are bad for horses ... [and] precisely as a rash, restive horse is said to feel his oats, so Turkey felt his coat. It made him insolent. He was a man whom prosperity harmed." The attitude underlying the narrator's remarks is extremely class (or caste) oriented and Turkey, like Nippers, is guilty of not knowing his place and not responding properly to what his employer has so graciously bestowed on him. The narrator's reasons for hiring Bartleby so quickly, after merely "a few words touching his qualifications," have to do largely with his appearance and dress—"singularly sedate," "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable"—and the hope that he would be a steadying influence on the uneven tempers of Nippers and Turkey, a model of the neatness, servility, dependence, obedience, gratitude, and contentment the master wants in his scribes.

The narrator's supreme position in this social microcosm is understood by his employees' normally deferential attitudes, prefacing their statements with phrases like "with submission, sir" or "excuse me," very much as verbal communication with a reigning monarch would be prefaced with "by your grace." (In marked contrast, however, is Bartleby's "I prefer not to"—a subtly scaled down or understated "non serviam.") The need for a third clerk is occasioned by the increased business resulting from what the narrator terms "receiving the Master's office." It is a conveniently abbreviated way of referring to his position as a Master in Chancery, but it further stresses the social, economic, and psychological relationship between the narrator and his clerks. The appointment to this office was not only a very lucrative circumstance, as the narrator points out, but it also conveyed considerable quasijudicial power. A Master in Chancery rendered decisions in those matters of equity which the common law did not cover and the courts were not constituted to settle. There is irony, of course, in the narrator's being responsible for determining matters of equity—what is fair, just, and impartial—when his Wall Street ways are so fraught with inequities. And there is further irony in the legal definition of *equity* which would apply the dictates of conscience or principles of natural justice to settle controversies. Needless to say, the partiality and self-interest of the narrator are never in doubt and his conscience is merely the internalized dictates of Wall Street. Melville may have had still more in mind in calling such considerable attention to "the Master's office," for *chancery* can refer to "a wrestling hold that imprisons the head or encircles the neck," and in legal usage the phrase *in chancery* can mean "in a helpless, hopeless, or embarrassing position." It would not have been beyond Melville to use such legalistic and lexicographical puns to stress the subjugation of Wall Street's white-collar proletariat. He could be even more blatant on this score in his indictment of socially respectable white slavery in "The Tartarus of Maids."

The divisions and confinements that underlie the social relationships are more tangibly embodied in the physical arrangements of the office. It becomes "a house divided" because such an arrangement fulfills the narrator's conception of propriety, proprietorship, and utility. It easily could be the stage setting for a work of twentieth-century expressionism:

Ground-glass folding-doors divided my premises into two parts, one of which was occupied by my scribes, the other by myself. According to my humor, I threw open these doors, or closed them. I resolved to assign Bartleby a corner by the folding doors, but on my side of them so as to have this quiet man within easy call, in case any trifling thing was to be done. I placed his desk close up to a small side-window ... Within three feet of the panes was a wall, and light came down from far above, between two lofty buildings, as from a very small opening in a dome. Still further to a satisfactory arrangement, I procured a high green folding

screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice. And thus, in a manner, privacy and society were conjoined.

In these circumstances Bartleby, at least initially, "did an extraordinary quantity of writing," copying through the night as well as day. But it was writing done on command, with as much originality as a machine could muster. When the narrator wants Bartleby to aid in proofreading, he calls with the "natural expectancy of instant compliance," and instead of compliance, Bartleby issues his first "I would prefer not to." The narrator sits stunned and unbelieving, as Bartleby's assertion of autonomy throws into turmoil the carefully controlled network of assumptions, expectations, and relationships.

In his quiet way Bartleby terrorizes the Wall Street establishment. His understated parody of Satan's refusal implies a greater threat than Nippers' acts of resentment, but only in the dubious light of the Wall Street establishment, which he will not serve, does Bartleby appear a satanic character. From a different perspective there might be a noble madness in the stubborn obstructiveness and passive withdrawal which constitute the developing strategy of his peculiar and paradoxical insurrection.

In one sense it is merely that Bartleby knows his place and will not leave it; in another sense his immobilized behavior seems an act of gross contempt for the conventions of a property-and-profit-oriented society. His appropriation of private property for personal use—first sleeping in the office and then staging a passive sit-in when directed to leave—strikes at the heart of the system. It also hits the narrator where he lives, as it were: he first feels "disarmed" by Bartleby's quiet rebellion and ultimately feels "unmanned" by the threat to his authority.

However weakened he personally feels, the narrator finds his role forced on him and his will stiffened by the Wall Street society that has served him so well. He must now serve that society and not Bartleby's crippling eccentricity. By the standards of that society Bartleby is a perverse nut, and for the narrator to continue to tolerate him would be sheer insanity. He is caught between the attitude of blandly benign accommodation, which has enabled him to turn so many circumstances to his own benefit, and the social rigidities and conformist practices of Wall Street, which will permit no such perversity or eccentricity as Bartleby's. His decision to oust Bartleby reflects the pressure of the business community which determines substantially his status and identity, and his rather bland, apologetic explanation is that "necessities connected with my business tyrannized over all other considerations." On Wall Street, apparently, good form, conformity, and business forms are the essential means of communication; thus the narrator's hoped for farewell to Bartleby (after giving him an amount in excess of wages due) concludes with phraseology taken directly from the form of business correspondence: "If, hereafter, in your new place of abode, I can be of any service to you, do not fail to advise me by letter." The message and the gift preceding it are a form of literal generosity but clearly lacking the spirit of genuine charity, and in their formality both gift and message discourage further communication and deny any idea of community.

When Bartleby fails to leave the premises as he has been directed, the narrator, with unconscious irony, puts the matter on a basis of business law, asking first, "What earthly right have you to stay here?"—not realizing that something more than "earthly right" might be involved. Then he follows with questions that again stress the profit-property nexus of Wall Street and of the culture at large: "Do you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours." Bartleby remains silent; these are not *his* questions, and his seemingly contemptuous withdrawal infuriates the narrator. In trying prudently to check his anger, he begins to recognize the lack of communal attachments in circumstances like those of his office. He recalls a recent murder case that must have been of note to the New York business community and wonders whether "the circumstance of being alone in a solitary office, upstairs, of a building entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations" did not help trigger the act.

His innate prudence makes him seek an alternative to anger toward Bartleby, one that will soothe his sensibilities without offending his practical businessman's principles. His first refuge is a form of prudential charity but predicated on self-interest. His second is a kind of pragmatic predestination that glosses his providential relationship to Bartleby. But neither of these theological or philosophical rationalizations enables him to withstand the continuing pressure from his professional peers, and his conscience—more properly his malleable conscientiousness—cave in. Yet thrust Bartleby into the street, he cannot; so he takes the unlikely course of moving his offices to another location, leaving Bartleby behind, breaking any possible connection, denying any further responsibility.

While Melville, through artfully constructed narrative, conveys a strong sense of the obstacles to community and the barriers to communication, he also drops hints of further enclosure, separation, or division. For one thing the narrator's description of his own power and authority melds into a supremacy that is more than social or economic. In describing Turkey's daily rhythm, he praises him for being "the blandest and most *reverential* of men in the morning," especially, "valuing his morning *services*" and resenting "his afternoon *devotions*" (when he is rash and excessively spirited). This deference and reverence is, of course, directed toward the narrator, who refers to himself as "*a man of peace*." These italicized terms might be merely a mildly humorous sort of irony were it not for the kind of vocabulary used in reference to Bartleby, or as a consequence of Bartleby. His first appearance is referred to as his "advent." He is "this forlornest of mankind"; and for the puzzled and troubled narrator, he is "not only useless as a necklace, but afflictive to bear." Several apparently unconscious puns on the word "assumption" spin off the narrator's reaction to Bartleby, and the narrator also speaks of Bartleby's "cadaverous triumph" and his "ascendency." Such a "string" of linked multiple meanings cannot be accidental, and most readers will recognize that these terms have special application in Christian worship.

Moreover, Bartleby is described repeatedly in terms that stress his lack of coloration, his silence, his omnipresence, and his seeming perpetuity—all of which give him a supernatural cast. He is "pallidly neat" upon his first appearance, and later the narrator is "awed into . . . tame compliance" by Bartleby's "pallid haughtiness." All told, the words *pallid*, *pale*, *pallor*, or some similar variation, are used fifteen times and *white* and *gray* once each in reference to Bartleby. Words that stress his silence—*quiet*, *calm*, *mute*, *still*, *noiseless*, as well as *silent* and other synonyms—appear more than twenty times. The emphasis on these attributes is important because of Melville's tendency to associate them with larger-than-life, awe-inspiring forces. To the narrator Bartleby also appears variously as an "apparition," "strange creature," "incubus," "ghost," or "haunt." Unlike other men, he never reads, never drinks beer, tea, or coffee, and seems to eat rarely and then only the spiced wafers called ginger nuts. In what seems an ironic commentary on the sacrament of communion, Bartleby dines on these wafers in solitude. Mystery surrounds his past; and his silence regarding his origins, family, motives, or complaints—Bartleby's own refusal to communicate—pushes the mystery into the present.

But before concluding that Bartleby is Christ (as Bruce Franklin, drawing heavily from the explication of Christian charity in Matthew 25, has done [in *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology*]), I would like to suggest that Melville has left room for a natural explanation as well as a supernatural one. Bartleby's symptoms could substantiate a diagnosis of severe mental illness; that is, his condition could be that of a man who is suffering from the delusion that he is Christ and reacting to the indifference, self-absorption, or ridicule of mid-nineteenth-century American society. Or even without the presence of such a delusion, Bartleby's condition could be the consequence of a sensitive individual's reaction to the insensitivity of his surroundings, and a present-day psychoanalyst would find the symptoms forming a familiar composite.

[In C. Peter Rosenbaum's *The Meaning of Madness: Symptomatology, Sociology, Biology, and Therapy of the Schizophrenias*] for example, we find the following symptoms for the type of catatonia which is characterized by stupor, with "an apparent, but not real, diminution of consciousness":

1. Negativism, echolalia
2. Automatism, dreaminess, grimacing
3. Immobility, waxy flexibility
4. Refusal to eat

Bartleby's negativism permeates every phase of his behavior, but it can be viewed as a distorted form of autonomy, an attempt at affirming the "I," a passive protest at depersonalization. And his repeated response "I prefer not to" differs from the typical echolalia, in which the affected individual repeats the interviewer's or therapist's statements. Bartleby echoes and thereby asserts only himself. Automatism, of course, characterized his action before and after his refusal to work. First he worked day and night, copying "silently, palely, mechanically," then withdrew behind his screen into the dreamy, immobile state that the narrator terms "his dead-wall reverie." The narrator compares Bartleby to a "pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero." Dr. Rosenbaum, describing schizophrenic patients in a catatonic stupor, writes that they "adopt strange, uncomfortable-looking, statuelike postures which they maintain for minutes or hours at a time." The narrator supposes that Bartleby's immobility and refusal to work are due to eye strain, "for his eyes looked dull and glazed." Rosenbaum explains that in this catatonic condition patients' "faces may portray dreaminess, grimacing, or tics, and frequently one has the impression that they are locked into contact with hallucinations to which ... they cannot respond." The narrator is depressed by the thought of Bartleby's meager diet and after his removal to the tombs tries to provide more amply, but Bartleby refuses to eat and dies "huddled" and "wasted" on the stones "at the base of the wall." Dr. Rosenbaum concludes his description, observing that "such patients may frequently be so immobilized that they neither eat nor maintain sphincter control" and adding that "tube feedings may be necessary to avoid death through inanition." The symptomatology is remarkably similar in these instances, and the similarity is probably more than a matter of coincidence. Perhaps Melville offered a serious diagnosis when he had the twelve-year-old office boy in the story say of Bartleby, "I think, sir, he's a little *lunny*."

But Melville's story is much more than a case history, and my purpose is not to force such a conjectural psychoanalysis of a fictional figure whose author, many will hasten to say, antedated the concepts and classifications of contemporary psychoanalysis. (There are too many instances when Melville's imagination led him to treat symbolically what social or behavioral science had not yet articulated for anyone to be long troubled by the thought that Melville could not have known such things. The serious artist is often surrogate psychoanalyst and vicarious victim in one.) My purpose here is to propose that Melville could have meant the natural explanation and the supernatural suggestions of Bartleby's behavior to reinforce each other in a more complex way than his friend Hawthorne had done in offering natural and supernatural alternatives.

To put it most simply, Bartleby is incapacitated by having internalized the schism that frustrates authentic community, intellectual and emotional communication, and spiritual communion. He has become a divided self, a kind of symbolic embodiment of what ails man and society. Obsessed by the imperfection around him, he is also affronted by such inadequate measures to make things right as having to verify copy. There is far more that cannot be made right in the human relationships that exist, in the lack of recognition or reinforcement for individual members of this false community on Wall Street. Having concluded, apparently, that in the kind of existence where vital reinforcement is unavailable, frustration is inevitable, Bartleby has no faith in what might possibly sustain him and opts out.

In requiring the reader to approximate Bartleby's vantage point even as the events are recounted by his establishment-oriented employer, Melville has anticipated the sort of challenge that R. D. Laing has issued to traditional psychoanalysis. His approach is not to classify psychotic patients as examples of disease but, by approximating the point of view of the patient in his particular environmental circumstances, to show how apparently odd or irrelevant behavior can be meaningful and appropriate. Schizophrenia thus appears a psychological strategy devised to defend the victim's humanity in the midst of threatening circumstances, and even his most bizarre behavior can be seen as a comprehensible response to his immediate situation. The

parallel to Melville's story is quite remarkable as Laing seeks to anchor the explanation of psychotic symptoms in the social setting of the patient....

Ironically, Bartleby has had an effect and both minor and major changes are in process. Nippers and Turkey, as well as the narrator, come to use the word "prefer" with increasing frequency (while unaware that they use it at all) and thereby show the subtle impact of Bartleby, who also remains unaware of his power to make involuntary converts even among those who oppose him or make him the target of their separate hostilities. He also seems unaware that an important personality change is in process in his employer whose efforts at charity, at first so prudential and pragmatic, become increasingly suffused with a sense of humanity and compassion. Although he never completely breaks free from his Wall Street propensities, he shows less need to rationalize his actions or find a utilitarian justification for them. His private reflections reveal not only the growth of tolerance and sympathy, but also the greater profundity of a spiritual conversion:

To put it most simply, Bartleby is incapacitated by having internalized the schism that frustrates authentic community, intellectual and emotional communication, and spiritual communion. He has become a divided self, a kind of symbolic embodiment of what ails man and society.

—*Marvin Fisher*

For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not unpleasing sadness. The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam. I remembered the bright silks and sparkling faces I had seen that day, ... and I contrasted them with the pallid copyist, and thought to myself, Ah, happiness courts the light, so we deem that misery there is none. These sad fancyings ... led on to other and more special thoughts, concerning the eccentricities of Bartleby. Presentiments of strange discoveries hovered around me. The scrivener's pale form appeared to me laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding-sheet.

"The bond of a common humanity," upon which the ideal of community and the concept of communion both depend, is not constant in the narrator's consciousness. The pressure of his Wall Street peers is still there, affecting him both before and after his move to new quarters. The new tenant who finds Bartleby is no more successful in getting him to work or to leave and when he seeks out the narrator to question him about his former employee, the narrator admits to no personal knowledge of or responsibility for Bartleby. In fact he denies Bartleby three times publicly before returning to his old quarters in a final effort to oust him. Bartleby, however, shows no interest in any other possible employment and refuses the narrator's remarkably generous offer to take him into his own home.

He has seen something more in the offer than generosity and his refusal indicates his unwillingness to expose himself further to the kind of situation that has repeatedly victimized him. The situation has all the characteristics of what Gregory Bateson and his associates first formulated as the "double-bind." In *Self and Others*, Laing summarizes the concept and offers his view of its sequential ingredients: (1) two or more persons, one of whom can be designated the "victim"; (2) a repeated pattern that comes to be a habitual expectation in the victim's experience; (3) a negative injunction, such as the narrator's "if you do not go away from these premises ..., I shall feel bound—indeed, I *am* bound ...," followed by a threat of abandonment. (4) a secondary injunction conflicting with the first, communicated by either verbal or nonverbal means, and absolving the narrator from responsibility for whatever punishment follows, as in the narrator's offer to take Bartleby into his home with the unspoken injunction that Bartleby will subsequently have to do his part; and (5) a further injunction prohibiting the victim from escaping, sealing him into the situation, as the symbolic walls or the narrator's reacting to Bartleby's immobility with "stationary you shall be, then," seem to have done. Once an individual has come to perceive his relationship in double-bind patterns, almost any part of the

expected sequence can be enough to precipitate the end result. For Bartleby, who has learned to expect this kind of entrapment, any attempt at communication invites catastrophe, existence becomes increasingly circumscribed, the walls more rigid, permanent, and inescapable.

In a scene that must be an ironic reversal of Christ driving the money-men from the Temple, Wall Street landlords and city authorities with considerable difficulty, remove Bartleby from the Wall Street office, arrest him as a vagrant, and lock him in the Tombs. When the narrator visits him there, he can stimulate in Bartleby no will to live, and Bartleby's last words to the narrator, who has tried to indicate what encouragement exists even in this environment are, appropriately enough, "I know where I am," and indeed this place of total enclosure is not unfamiliar—the same encircling walls, the same repressive and punitive normality, and the same stony embodiment of antihuman institutions. The narrator imagines Bartleby spending his last days amid "murderers and thieves," tries unsuccessfully to provide him with food, and describes him, after he has died, as asleep "with kings and counselors." The phraseology is extraordinarily portentous, yet somehow appropriate to "this forlornest of mankind."

Appended to the story is an unconfirmed rumor about Bartleby's previous employment as "a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington." Its position compels us to consider the paragraph even more carefully than the narrator does for its relevance to the preceding account. He sees it as a possible seed bed for Bartleby's negativism and a more certain source of his depression:

Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames?

His question is not merely rhetorical, and to some extent he answers it himself. But the question is also a challenge to the reader who has been led through an account of Bartleby's last days in a somewhat stultifying law office in the heart of New York's financial district, where he labored in the service of a man who did "a snug business among rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title-deeds." Thus part of the answer points to a society where the business of life is business and not life, and to the example of a man who chose the quietest alternative to such a desperate business.

The narrator's answer points to something else, too. Considering those undeliverable letters, he continues:

For by the cart-load they are annually burned. Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.

Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!

Undeniably, the narrator's words tend toward the sentimental and the melodramatic, but they are not banal. He has come a long way and has been drawn into a human problem for which there is no neat legal solution. In the only terms he could employ to express his tragic insight, he has called our attention again to the major areas of concern in the story—the frustration of timely communication, the distances between or the barriers to productive human union, the utter despair of those who die still looking for answers, and the essential inhumanity of a society that treats these poignant records of human experience as so much waste for the incinerator. From his earlier perspective he could insist that while there is life there is hope, a way out of any disturbing situation; the sad, concluding sentences of the story offer another view of the human condition: where there is life there is death, the most totally binding and inescapable aspect of existence.

The narrator had begun as a strong proponent of his own ethic of personal enrichment, a gospel of wealth for its own sake, and unexpectedly confronted a mysterious individual who, in an actual or in an ironic sense, represented "the truth that would make men free" and who died in prison himself. But instead of merely re-creating a basic pattern of Christian faith, Melville gives it compelling contemporary relevance by implying that the money-worshiper's utilitarian and demeaning view of men as commodity or chattel is "deicidal" because it is essentially "homicidal." It had cost Nippers and Turkey their full manhood, even before the "advent" of Bartleby. But paradoxically the lawyer-employer-master, who had been instrumental in stifling the human spirit and thereby denying God, is himself a slave to his Wall Street preconceptions. He seems to realize this at the end, but we do not know whether his insight will make him free. Like Emerson in his "Divinity School Address," Melville seems to be saying that any man can be his own Christ, not, however, in the role of serving as his own savior as Emerson insisted, but rather of realizing his own torment, abandonment, and martyrdom.

Despite the religious imagery in the story, there is little sense that death is Bartleby's liberation, somewhat more reason, perhaps, to believe in the narrator's redemption. He has had to serve as a not very willing or successful therapist in a relationship where the victim views his treatment as further persecution and where the narrator-therapist is forced to recognize in the victim an extreme example of what all men are heir to. Having lived as if he were already a prisoner, Bartleby precipitated a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Dying in the Halls of Justice, he confirms the metaphors by which he had lived—that the condition of life in human society is as circumscribed as that in a prison, and that a stony refusal is the most telling strategy against surrounding insensitivity.

R. D. Laing has used the term "petrification" to describe the kind of defensive network Bartleby employs. He suggests that an individual who dreads the possibility of being turned into an inanimate object, a machine, or an automaton, and deprived of personal autonomy, may fight back by negating the other person's autonomy, ignoring his feelings, and thereby depersonalizing him—as Bartleby does repeatedly, the last time being his answer to the narrator who has come to the Tombs, seen him, and called his name. Without turning around, Bartleby says, "I know you ... and I want nothing to say to you." According to Laing, such a contemptuous effort to turn the other person into a thing is a strategy of "nullifying any danger to himself by secretly totally disarming the enemy." Hence there is deep psychological trauma as well as social and economic threat in the circumstances which impel the narrator to refer to himself twice as "disarmed" and twice more as "unmanned." And those circumstances, beginning with Bartleby's first stony refusal, illustrate Laing's reciprocal dynamic of "petrification." The narrator describes his initial reaction in terms of stony transformation: "I was turned into a *pillar* of salt, standing at the head of my seated *column* of clerks," but he simultaneously reveals his own earlier depersonalization of his clerks. Melville actually seems to have been using this imagery of petrification consciously, for not only is Bartleby early compared to a piece of statuary, he seems, when the narrator gives him money and orders him to leave, "like the last column of some ruined temple." Laing's view, borne out by Melville's story, is that the petrification process "involves a vicious circle. The more one attempts to preserve one's autonomy and identity by nullifying the specific human individuality of the other, the more it is felt to be necessary to continue to do so, because with each denial of the other person's ontological status, one's own ontological security is decreased, the threat to the self from the other is potentiated and hence has to be even more desperately negated."

Bartleby's stony behavior thus could be viewed as an attempt to forestall the threat of being turned into an inanimate thing by his employer, a defensive strategy to avoid being sucked into or engulfed by the narrator's Wall Street whirlpool. To prevent his becoming an object and drawn into his employer's world, Bartleby turns himself into a stubborn and steadfast stone. His function is far more limited than before; he is either an opaque immobility that puzzles and offends his employer or a reflector turning back the other's gaze. Frustrated by the fraudulent communication he has had to participate in, he becomes a silence or an echo—the only communication one gets from a stone.

The narrator's last words express in part his realization of what Bartleby has exemplified and the general susceptibility of humanity to such a view. Not only has Bartleby been physically and psychologically crippled by the pattern of double-binds in his life, but the narrator has recognized his own involvement in the pattern, initially as master and ultimately as victim. Like the therapist who may be drawn into the psychosis of his patient or the lawyer who may participate vicariously in the criminality of his client, the narrator also recognizes that he has furthered the frequently unfair laws of the dominant society. In this sense of a shared fate he has become Bartleby's double, and his account might even be suggesting the universal applicability of such an appalling conclusion. At least he has grasped the general lesson that Bartleby never fully articulated, but we don't know whether he will act on any of its more immediate corollaries, such as the somber irony that there is as much justice in the Tombs as there is equity in the Wall Street law office.

There is no hint of a physical resurrection in the story; Bartleby does not rise from the Tombs, even though some tufts of new grass grow underfoot. But there is a possibility that the narrator has accomplished in his record of mind, memory, and conscience the only immortality Bartleby was to have. Or to put it differently, Melville, in the artfully re-created conscience of his narrator, has ambiguously reaffirmed Bartleby's "cadaverous triumph" and his ultimate "ascendency." And in this sense the narrator's lament for Bartleby and for humanity is prompted by his recognition that for the greater number of persons now alive or yet to be born Bartleby can appear only an unredeemable fool, his contempt for the world an unholy madness, his attempt at social insurrection an abortive failure, and his resurrection out of the question. In Melville's dimly lit theater of hope, life is too often a surrealistic allegory; and art, which could reverse the conventional view of the world and invert the more typical judgments of society, is our feeble means of redemption.

Criticism: Christopher Bollas (essay date 1974)

SOURCE: "Melville's Lost Self: *Bartleby*," in *American Imago*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Winter, 1974, pp. 401-11.

[In the following essay, Bollas argues that a psychological interpretation of "Bartleby" demonstrates the value of psychoanalysis to literary criticism.]

Herman Melville's short novel "Bartleby" is, a tale about a "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn" young man who answers an advertisement for a position as a scrivener. He is accepted for employment, disrupts the routine of his new environment when he "prefers not to" engage in certain assigned tasks, forces the employer to feel a resourcelessness that compels him to move his office. It ends in Bartleby's pathetic death after he has been hustled off to prison.

I believe that Bartleby's arrival at the office and his subsequent breakdown into negativity is a mimetic representation of a need to find a nurturant space where he can regress toward the healing of a "basic fault" in the self. I want to focus on "Bartleby" as a transitional moment in Melville's fiction when his central heroic type (Ahab, Ishmael, Taji, Pierre) shifts from searching to being found, where Bartleby's search for the employer becomes a move toward discovery, his existential ambience that of throwing out a deeply dissociated self state. "Bartleby" provides us with an opportunity to study a subject's expression of his autism, where relinquishing of the self's executive ego functions becomes a lingual invitation to the other to fill the absence of function with the nurture of care, to cradle in supporting arms the dissolving self in its unintegrated muteness, as the other is induced, without words, to create the ambience desired by a self dying in order to be reborn. "Bartleby" is uniquely suited for study of several central concerns in contemporary psychoanalysis, and because it can provide the literary critic with an appreciation of the contribution current psychoanalytic studies of the self can make to literary studies.

The narrator begins the story by describing himself as a "rather elderly man, ... a man who, from his youth upwards has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best," made easier by

"the cool tranquility of a snug retreat" where he does a "snug business among rich men's bonds, and mortgages and titledeeds." "All who know me," he tells us, "consider me an eminently *safe* man." Indeed, it is lucky for his employees, Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut, that he is such a gentle man. For in the "snug retreat" of their office space, these workers—whose names have been mutually conferred as embodying their characteristics—regularly complement one another in the dripping of ink, knocking over of chairs, spilling of sandboxes, breaking of pens, and hoarding of food. In their kaleidoscopic world, these workers incarnate the instincts: oral; in their food names, their teeth grinding, hoarding and spilling of food; anal, in the spilling of ink, of sand, and waste of food remains; phallic, in the comic erections of self (i.e. when Turkey is up, Nippers is down). Despite the kindergarten atmosphere, the narrator values each of his helpers, and by dividing his space from theirs by a folding glass door, he indicates a distance between their embodiment of instinct and his own function as the executant self.

Then Bartleby arrives. The employer-narrator hires him and provides him with a special space on his side of the sliding doors, facing a wall some three feet away. "Still further to a satisfactory arrangement," he says "I procured a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice. And thus, in a manner, privacy and society were conjoined." In setting up this "necessary arrangement," the narrator continues his function as the facilitating agent in providing for others, his arranged space for Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut already termed a "good natural arrangement, under the circumstances."

Readers of Melville's novel *Pierre*, which preceded this short novel by less than a year, may note the similarity between Bartleby's arranged space and Pierre's closet where the latter lapsed into reverential time before a portrait of his idealized dead father. Pierre's ritual withdrawal to his closet is vital to our knowledge of Bartleby and to the *meconnaissance* between the narrator and his curious employee. Disillusioned by the shattering news of his father's illegitimate siring of a daughter, Pierre rips his father's portrait from the wall of his closet. This collapse in the *image* of the idealized father precipitates a violent and more troubling rift with his mother, who casts him out of her home. Pierre flees to New York with his new wife, none other than his illegitimate sister. Above all, it seems to me, *Pierre* is a novel about the collapse of illusion—metaphorically stated, in the mimesis of Pierre's removal of his father's portrait—and in a youth's incapacity to rescue himself from catastrophic disillusion. As Pierre wanders through an art gallery not long before his violent death, he muses: "All the walls of the world seemed thickly hung with the empty and impotent scope of pictures, grandly outlined, but miserably filled." Walls no longer hold ideal images on their surface and in Melville's fiction, I believe, this signifies the absence of generative illusion, so that Bartleby's disfunctional autism is a psychosomatic communication, a use of the self as signifier, where the signified broadly represents the loss of generative illusion, and specifically, the loss of the paternal and maternal imagos. As we learn at the end of the story, Bartleby has come to this work after being fired from his post in the Dead Letter Office at Washington, a job that compels the narrator to reflect aptly: "Dead Letters! does it not sound like dead men?" "On errands of life," he ponders, "these letters speed to death," and Bartleby's former work signifies, I think, his retreat after his failure to find a voice in the Word to speak his pain, dead letters signifying the death of the Word.

The narrator senses Bartleby's needs by providing him with a private space, alongside of a protective other. "At first, Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents." But the feeding fails to nurture the novice scrivener, who writes "silently, palely, mechanically," his craft pointing to the absence of any internal creative potential. A man who has sorted dead letters now writes in a dead manner, his copying an empty gesture marking the absence of language. Copying of the Word leads not to an identification with the other (as a child's learning of language sponsors an identification with his parents), but to a truncated isolation from the fruits of grasping the Word. Embryonic in his enclosed space, the young scrivener resorts to the Word—spoken in neutral and economic tones—only to ward off the other. When asked to join in the varied routines of collective tasks, he refuses:

"I would prefer not to," he said. I looked at him steadfastly. His face was leanly composed; his grey eyes dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors.

At first outraged and perplexed by Bartleby's uncommon reply, the narrator shifts his response when he grasps that his new employee's resistance is unintended as rebellion, indeed, he feels himself drawn into "a bond of common humanity" with his strange office fellow. So, when he learns that Bartleby lives in the office, the narrator is plunged into sharing a sense of Bartleby's homelessness: "It is evident enough that Bartleby has been making his home here, keeping bachelor's hall all by himself. Immediately then the thought came sweeping across me, what miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible!" He reflects on his new employee's habit of gazing in perfect solitude on "the dead brick wall," a phenomenon he describes as "dead-wall reveries." Feeling the new scrivener to be a "victim of an innate and incurable disorder," he says: "I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach." With the others he has found viable interplay between his function as director (executant ego) and their rhythmic expression of instinct; but Bartleby brings to him a deep absence in the self, a subject prior to the reflexive experience of instincts. This vacant quality in the new employee threatens the narrator's moderately compulsive defenses and leaves him with the uncertain feeling that he is incapable of doing anything for Bartleby.

Matters worsen. As if sensing the narrator's recognition of his own helplessness, Bartleby gives up working altogether. The employer tries unsuccessfully to fire him, but fails because Bartleby remains unresponsive to demand. Once again, Bartleby's presence creates an alien feeling in the narrator: "I might enter my office in a great hurry, and pretending not to see Bartleby at all, walk straight against him as if he were air." Again he accommodates, in fact, finds solace simply in Bartleby's presence. "I never feel so private as when I know you are here," he muses and adds humorously, "my mission in this world, Bartleby, is to furnish you with office-room for such period as you may see fit to remain." He considers acting as if his existence were to serve his strange companion, but this reflection is never actualized because his colleagues' reaction to his eccentric employee compels him to acknowledge reality. Unable to budge Bartleby, the narrator goes to the extreme of moving his office ("Strange to say—I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of") but is later called upon by the legal counsel of the building's new occupant—who is faced with the same dilemma—to remove this strangely unresponsive character who now says: "I like to be stationary."

As the story comes to its enigmatically tragic end, Bartleby is hustled off to the Tombs by an irate crowd and a furious landlord. After a while, the narrator comes to visit him in the prison, and discovers that because of Bartleby's serenity and apparent harmlessness, the prison authorities have allowed him to freely wander about the prison. The narrator finds him "standing all alone in the quietest of the yards, his face towards a high wall." As he approaches, Bartleby replies: "I know you ... and I want nothing to say to you." Once again, unable to get through to Bartleby, the narrator takes his leave, but returns several days later to find that he has refused to eat. Told by a guard that Bartleby is asleep, he approaches his friend's space.

Strangely huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up, and lying on his side, his head touching the cold stones, I saw the wasted Bartleby. But nothing stirred. I paused; then went close up to him; stooped over, and saw that his dim eyes were open; otherwise he seemed profoundly sleeping. Something prompted me to touch him. I felt his hand, when a tingling shiver ran up my arm and down my spine to my feet.

The round face of the grub-man peered upon me now.

"His dinner is ready. Won't he dine to-day, either? Or does he live without dining?"

"Lives without dining," said I, and closed the eyes.

Bartleby, to my mind, is Ahab or Pierre come in out of the cold. The counterphobic search, the manic heroic *quest* is over, the true self finally existentially revealed in its condition of absolute need for the other is Melville's subject, in this, the saddest of his works. In "Bartleby," the split in Melville's characters (Ahab/Ishmael) is fused temporarily in an isolated figure whose heroic passivity is both an active thrust against the narrator and an evocation of a desire to be provided for, permitting a complete shutting down of the self, willed into, and like Ahab, against existence. Unable to speak, except to use language against itself, Bartleby's loss of a creative use of the Word signifies a final stage in this character's renunciation of culture, begun with Pierre's disillusion with the image of an ideal father. But such withdrawal, like the artist's seclusion from what Heidegger terms the world of "They," may be a falling into one's privacy in order to intensify the value of "They," to find in one's privacy a way back toward living. Michael Balint terms this a "regression for the sake of progression," a collapse in ego maintenance as the subject falls toward the "basic fault" in the self, in order to constitute a "new beginning." Bartleby falls into the "necessary arrangement" provided by the nurturant narrator, and after an intense satiation of rigid activity, he lapses into dead-wall reveries, in such deep regression that he can no longer work, nor respond to the narrator's exhortations to try.

It seems to me that the narrator, like the reader of this story, waits for something to happen, to materialize like the phoenix from Bartleby's ashen vacancy. Indeed, Bartleby hints at least once that his extraordinary privacy may be temporary when to the narrator's pleas for more information about himself he replies: "At present I prefer to give no answer." Will he, at some future date, finally tell? Melville's tale suggests to me an answer. In the culture of the 1850's, there is no generative space or time to permit a shutting down of the executive function of the self. Bartleby's only hope is to find some capacity to use the Word. The narrator's placement of his new employee, secluded in private, yet joined to a facilitating other, sequestered before the Word that he must copy if he is to live, is an instinctive and "necessary arrangement" for Bartleby's survival. The first step in this new beginning will be imitation (copying), like the child's imitating his mother's tongue, a preliminary to the child's creative use of his own Word. But Bartleby's copying of the Word does not revivify the dead letters, and failing to find a transformational grammar, he can only repeat an empty phrase that signifies his incapacity to symbolize his needs. In the America of the 1850's, there is no space but a prison for someone so desperately ill.

On one level, as I have argued, Bartleby's presence sponsors a series of actions by the narrator, responses to an *absence* in Bartleby, that in the dialectical rhythm of presence of the subject, signifying an absence in the subject eliciting a presence in the other, mimetically recreates the need of the lonely scrivener to have his pain held by the other. This mimesis—sponsored by the dialectical interplay of presence/absence/presence—is Bartleby's language, his way of in-forming the other's response. With scant information about Bartleby through verbal language, the narrator comes to know his new friend by allowing himself to be manipulated (used as Bartleby's object), and by sensing the other through internal psychic and affective presences in himself. Like the narrator, we discover Bartleby as he exists inside the narrator. Indeed, Melville's story is primarily concerned with how Bartleby sponsors affective states in the narrator who feels compassionate, nurturant, helpless, resourceless, anxious, dispossessed, enraged, humiliated, abused, playful, pleasurable, and guilty, and who tries to defend himself by compliance, compulsive boundary setting, avoidance, denial, exorcism, and finally flight. This phenomenology of affect and defense is a phantom reflection of the silent scrivener, an affect language not spoken to the narrator, but thrown into and then lived out by him.

It seems to me, after some reflection, that Bartleby embodies an absence in the self of this blithely cheerful narrator, a psychic double who represents the dramatic and aggravating presence of a repudiated true self: the internal other in the personality that is a collage of psychically, familiarly, and culturally disowned instincts

and ego states that are never realized in the active life of the subject. Never actualized because they are sequestered through repression or splitting from being lived out, they are known to the executant self by the energy and style of the defenses organized against this true self. Ironically then, the presence of the true self is known primarily by the defenses that signify its absence. Bartleby, however, assaults the narrator's defensive style, forcing the narrator to feel the pain of the true self, to meet its needs, and to acknowledge its absence as a horrid personal loss. Gradually, the force of the true self threatens the executant self as the latter (personalized in the narrator) feels itself merging with the true self (personalized in Bartleby).

Somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word "prefer" upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further and deeper aberration might it not yet produce? This apprehension had not been without efficacy in determining me to summary measures.

It is when the narrator begins to merge with Bartleby—by adopting his habit of mind—that he is prompted by his anxiety to dissociate himself from Bartleby, the latter's state of being compelling the former toward a series of actions (doing) designed to protect the executant self (the doing self) against the true self (in Melville, the self in inert being). Indeed, the more the narrator is compelled toward doing, the more isolated is the being of Bartleby, until finally action becomes a psychic repudiation of being that leads to ultimate social dissociation (prison) and death.

Bartleby mimes the insistent presence of the unknowable and unspeakable. (Since the ultimate dissociation is separation from the Word, then the true self's vital dependency on the executant self's capacity to speak from it is lost). But this is not a story about the repudiation of a troubling and troubled presence as in *Moby Dick* (perhaps, a final exorcism of Ahab), for the narrator is made to mourn the loss of Bartleby. "For the first time in my life," he says "a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not unpleasing sadness." The overpowering melancholy draws him toward his friend even after he has been removed from him: "the bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy."

So Bartleby does make the heretofore smooth running executant self feel the pain of grief for the first time in his life, a sadness sponsored by the unmet needs and desperate isolation of a double, a figure "out there" who embodies an internal absence. When this internal vacant self confronts the blithely cheerful narrator in his old age, he tries to provide for it, nurture it in his own way toward a lively integration with the natural order of things: the culture of his office. All his efforts fail to vitalize an absence in his being. For Bartleby is, finally, like the damaged true self, an internal presence that is *unconsolable*. All that is left to the grieving narrator is a profound recognition and sense that something terribly needy, horribly isolated, "incurably forlorn" is lost forever.

All of Melville's heroes feel this internal haunting other in themselves, whether it is the mysterious stranger that lives inside Babbalanja or the gnawing presence in Ahab. Sometimes, the other is projected outside, writ large upon the landscape and encountered by the executant self as with Ahab and the whale. I believe this aggravated and mysterious other is also in the author of all these stories, an absent presence in Melville who tries in his fiction to throw it out into imaginary characters, but whose novels signify its mysterious isolation. Failing to exorcize this other in *Moby Dick*, to marry it in *Pierre*, or to revivify it in "Bartleby," Melville turns in *The Confidence Man* to an apparently bitter expostulation of the sorcery—the compensatory cleverness—of the false self (the executant self uninformed by the true self). In the *Confidence Man*, illusion manipulation becomes the tool of the con man who metamorphoses himself into multiple false selves, and Melville signifies in this novel the end of his effort to give voice to the unknown interior self by fashioning an illusionist who, like the artist, can obscure the existence of an interior presence by sheer artifice. If the Confidence Man is born of despair and failure, if it is a magical evocation of the art of deceit, it is still a curious celebration of

Melville's talent for fashioning illusion, a sweet bitterness before the long years of silence and absence.

Criticism: R. K. Gupta (essay date 1974)

SOURCE: "'Bartleby': Melville's Critique of Reason," in *Indian Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 4, Nos. 1-2, June and December, 1974, pp. 66-71.

[In the following excerpt, Gupta insists that the narrator of "Bartleby" represents reason, and that Bartleby, in confounding the narrator, emphasizes the inability of pure reason to negotiate human behavior.]

"Say now, that in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable:—say so, Bartleby."

"At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable," was his mildly cadaverous reply.

The unnamed narrator of "Bartleby" is an apostle of reason. His outlook on life is clear, unambiguous, and uncluttered by mysticism or imagination. Reason and common sense are his deities, and he looks upon them as infallible guides to human conduct.

All goes well with the narrator until he decides to engage as his new scrivener an inscrutable and "motionless" young man named Bartleby. For two days, Bartleby diligently does "an extraordinary quantity of writing." But on the third day, when the narrator calls him to compare a copy sheet, Bartleby, "in a singularly mild, firm voice," replies: "I would prefer not to." The narrator is stunned by what he considers to be the unreasonableness of Bartleby's conduct and briefly argues with him. But Bartleby remains unmoved.

On Bartleby's representativeness:

The narrator's realization that Bartleby's condition represents the human condition, that his relationship with the scrivener is symbolic, is the final and most profound irony of this ironic tale. Preternaturally and pathologically withdrawn, what more unlikely person could be found as a symbol for all humanity than this scrivener? Lacking in qualities "ordinarily human," the "forlornest of mankind," "A bit of wreck in the mid-Atlantic," "deranged," "inscrutable"—these are the terms the narrator has used to describe Bartleby, the terms we must recall fully to understand the depth of irony contained in the final revelation. The bond of common humanity the narrator finally sees, is not that of a comfortable Christian piety which enjoins love, compassion, and generosity; it is the strange and disconcerting bond of isolation which does not oppose but simply makes irrelevant the conventional pieties that have guided the narrator's life. This insight turns the mystery of Bartleby into an appalling revelation.

Richard Abcarian, in "The World of Love and the Spheres of Fright: Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener'," Studies in Short Fiction, Vol. 1, No. 3, Spring 1964, pp. 207-15.

A few days later, the narrator again solicits Bartleby's help, and Bartleby again replies: "I would prefer not to." This time, the narrator is so amazed at Bartleby's intransigence that for a few moments he is "turned into a pillar of salt." The first thing he does on recovering his composure is to ask the "reason" for it: "Why do you refuse?" (italics Melville's). When Bartleby simply repeats the refrain: "I would prefer not to," the narrator begins to "reason with him." His appeal is to "common usage and common sense." But even this appeal goes unheeded and Bartleby tells him that his decision—or shall I say preference—is irreversible. This greatly

upsets the narrator, particularly because Bartleby's refusal is "unprecedented" and "unreasonable."

Several days pass. But Bartleby shows no sign of relenting, and continues in his course of passive resistance. Again and again, the narrator asks him to do something "perfectly reasonable," and again and again his only reply is: "I would prefer not to." The narrator is not so much annoyed at the inconvenience that Bartleby's conduct causes him as he is flabbergasted by its "perverseness" and "unreasonableness." He has spent his whole life shutting out whatever is unpleasant or inconvenient. His mind has, therefore, fallen into a groove it cannot easily get out of. Bartleby's advent, however, creates a situation with which he can cope effectively only if he can break out of his routine and think in unaccustomed ways. Since nothing in his life and experience has prepared him for such an eventuality, he feels helpless and lost. The story dramatizes how tragically the narrator fails to deal with Bartleby in an effective manner and how Bartleby's steady and compulsive refusal gradually undermines the norms by which he has lived so far.

In course of time, the narrator becomes sufficiently interested in Bartleby to want to know the details of his life and the source of his malady. But even here he is frustrated, and Bartleby prefers not to tell him anything about himself. The narrator is now completely nonplussed: what "reasonable objection," he wonders, can Bartleby have to speak to him. After all, he feels "friendly" towards him. Even now, he clings tenaciously, although somewhat precariously, to his hope that given time, Bartleby may be brought round to see reason, and in a highly significant scene, he addresses Bartleby thus:

"Bartleby, never mind, then, about revealing your history; but let me entreat you, as a friend, to comply as far as may be with the usages of this office. Say now you will help to examine papers to-morrow or next day: in short, say now that in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable—say so, Bartleby."

"At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable,"
was his mildly cadaverous reply.

Critics have shown great ingenuity trying to determine the cause of Bartleby's malady. But to look for a rational explanation of Bartleby's conduct is to repeat the narrator's mistake and to miss the whole point of the story. The most significant aspect of Bartleby's behavior is that it is not only unexplained but also inexplicable, and that it is therefore futile to invoke reason and common sense in dealing with it or in trying to understand it. Melville carefully refrains from identifying the source of Bartleby's problem, because Bartleby's very irrationality is the point of his story. In "Bartleby" Melville clearly suggests what is confirmed by modern psychology: that men are not primarily creatures of reason, but are controlled by dimly perceived instinctual drives and obscure impulses, and that this being so, one needs much more than reason and common sense to deal effectively with human problems.

Herein, I think, lies the failure—or should we call it the limitation of the narrator. He pitches reason's claims exceptionally high and over-estimates the range of the results that can be achieved by an exclusive reliance on it. He has too much confidence in the efficacy of intellectual processes. Unaware of the merits of unreflecting spontaneity, he has committed himself to the slow pace, the qualifications and hedging of rational thought. For a long time, critics have debated what the narrator could or should have done, and some have gone to the extent of showing annoyance with Bartleby and considerable respect for the narrator. That the narrator is benevolent and well-intentioned is undoubtedly true, but it is also completely irrelevant. What is relevant is his flatulence and evasion, and his application of only compromises and half-measures to what is an extreme malady—"innate and incurable disorder" as he himself calls it. But the "disorder" is "incurable" only in terms of the palliatives that the narrator, with his limited vision, can think of. Because he has boundless faith in the efficacy of unaided reason as an instrument of action, he is totally helpless when exposed to a reason-defying situation. When faced with Bartleby's unreasonable wilfulness, the best that he can do is to try to reason him out of it through appeals to tradition, authority, and common usage.... But the situation calls for more than

reason; it calls for intuition and imagination, which the narrator has eschewed all his life. Henri Bergson remarks that the surest way to attain the truth is by perception and intuition, by reasoning to a certain point, then by taking a "mortal leap." The narrator, however, can go only so far as reason takes him. Not being gifted with imagination and intuition, he is incapable of taking the "mortal leap" that might have enabled him to cope with his problem successfully.

From the standpoint of conventional morality, of course, no guilt attaches to the narrator. His guilt, as Maurice Friedman points out [in his "'Bartleby' and the Modern Exile"], is "existential guilt," the guilt of "human existence itself, the guilt that every man feels when his responsibility for another is unlimited while his resources are limited." He is, to be sure, more tolerant than most people would have been in his situation, and he was constitutionally incapable of the kind of sympathy that was required. But the narrator in "Bartleby" is not judged from the viewpoint of conventional morality. He is judged from the viewpoint of idealistic Christian morality, from standards which, to use Plotinus Plinlimmon's phrase in *Pierre*, are "chronometrical" rather than "horological." The attorney in Murray's ["'Bartleby' and I"] complains thus:

But my profoundest, all-embracing grievance comes from an uneasy feeling, or suspicion, that Mr. Melville was out to flog me with the Sermon on the Mount, as if to say, you should have given the full measure of your love to Bartleby, all of it, every atom's atom of it, without reservations, qualifications, or reflections as to the consequences of so selfless a commitment of compassion. You should have sacrificed your profession, deserted your clients, set aside your duties to the High Court of Chancery, and taken Bartleby to live with you at home. Is not the author implying this and nothing less? If he is, I'd like to ask, what right has he to judge me from that unearthly and inhuman pinnacle of ethics?

The narrator's morality, however, is firmly rooted in expediency, and his self-interest tends to supplant altruistic considerations. Even his kindness is not entirely a product of compassion but is often motivated by prudence. When faced with spiritual crises, he responds with his usual stance of reason and common sense, a stance admirably suited to his own utilitarian world, but hopelessly ineffectual in relation to Bartleby's situation. As an apostle of reason, he so desperately seeks rational explanations for Bartleby's conduct that he is driven to read "Edwards on the Will" and "Priestley on Necessity" in the vain hope that these writers might shed light on it. The rumored explanation of Bartleby's conduct that he offers in the epilogue is again an attempt on his part to account in a tidy and rational manner, for what is essentially above and beyond reason. Even after having undergone the experience, the narrator has not understood its full purport. Although he has had glimpses into hitherto unexplored aspects of life, he has not assimilated his experience fully. In fact, he is still bewildered by it, and his recounting of the experience might well be the result of his compulsive need to rationalize it, and thus to exorcise it out of his system where it has for long festered as a sore, upsetting his precise and measured ways of life.

In the final analysis then, the story focuses on the narrator's failure of perception and judgment. His unswerving faith in reason and common sense renders him unfit for dealing effectively with Bartleby's situation. He tries to cure Bartleby's spiritual paralysis by tentative acts of charity, and fails to realize that Bartleby's problem could not be fathomed by logic but only by imaginative understanding. He is thus one of those mundane men who reduce everything to what Carlyle's Teufelsdröckh calls "Attorney-Logic." Spiritual insight is not granted to such as he. Ministering utilitarian solutions to spiritual problems, he becomes what Teufelsdröckh calls a "sandblind pedant":

whoso recognizes the unfathomable, all-pervading domain of Mystery, which is everywhere under our feet and among our hands; to whom the Universe is an Oracle and Temple, as well as a Kitchen and Cattle stall,—he shall be a delirious Mystic; to him thou with sniffing charity, wilt protrusively proffer thy hand-lamp, and shriek, as one injured, when he kicks his foot through it—*Armer Teufel*... Retire into private places with thy foolish cackle; or what

were better, give it up, and weep, not that thy reign of wonder is done, and God's world all disembellished and prosaic, but that thou hitherto art a Dilletante and sandblind pedant.

Thus in "Bartleby" Melville brings out the limits of reason as a guide to human conduct and as a controlling factor in human behavior and stresses the need for understanding and imagination. He shows in unmistakable terms that intellectual and analytical processes are not the most decisive determinants of the beliefs and conduct of men, and that human behavior, therefore, cannot be fully grasped by reason but only by imagination. Although Melville did not share the Transcendentalist belief in the supremacy and infallibility of intuition, he recognized its need and its value in establishing meaningful human relationships. The need for human interdependence is, after all, a recurrent theme in Melville's fiction, and in "Bartleby" Melville shows a full awareness of how lack of insight and intuition and an exclusive reliance on reason can block channels of communication. No wonder, then, that the story should seem teasingly modern in rhythm, idiom, and controlling vision, and that critics should seek—and find—its analogues, not in Melville's contemporaries, but in such Russian masters as Gogol, Goncharov, and Dostoevsky, and in the modern existentialists such as Sartre, Camus, and Kafka.

Criticism: Ted Billy (essay date 1975)

SOURCE: "Eros and Thanatos in 'Bartleby,'" in *Arizona Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Spring, 1975, pp. 21-32.

[In the following essay, Billy interprets the narrator and Bartleby, respectively, as fictional projections of eros and thanatos principles in Melville's own psyche, and considers "Bartleby" a portrait of psychological conflict between the life and death instincts.]

The final comment of Melville's narrator in "Bartleby the Scrivener" ("Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!") acts as a synecdoche for the irreconcilable struggle that animates the novella. This brief statement of commiseration does more than merely link Bartleby's predicament to the universal human situation. It pinpoints the root of the conflict—the antagonism between the isolated individual and the whole of society. Melville chooses as his theme the tragic fragmentation of the human sensibility. This fragmentation in man's psyche stems from the loss of the intrinsic interaction between the human organism and his immediate physical environment. "Bartleby" serves as the literary objectification of Melville's intense awareness of the psychological trauma of fragmentation, anxiety, and alienation. And behind it all lies the source of psychic disequilibrium—a dead, blank wall—the void of nothingness.

The narrator and Bartleby are fictional projections of the eros and thanatos principles in Melville's divided self. Bartleby embodies the death instinct, separateness, negation, the futility of existence, masochism, and the desolation of human mortality. But the pathetic scrivener also signifies the impulse toward self-preservation through the isolating independence of the individual life, which utterly rejects the collectivity of the human species. The narrator represents eros, the life instinct, the desire for communion among the collective unconscious of mankind. In this respect, he is Melville's fictional representative of the love impulse (specifically charity) which seeks union and interdependence to promote the survival of the human species. The narrator's various attempts to empathize with Bartleby and offer the morose scrivener the community of his own home are expressions of the human need for the life instinct to attain unification with its opposite, the death instinct. For man can never be free of paralyzing anxiety until he accepts the nothingness of death.

This antagonistic dualism of eros and thanatos really oversimplifies a perennial and complex problem. Yet this conflict remains the basis for all human neuroses and discontent. For man's entrance into self-consciousness is a fall "from a condition of undifferentiated primal unity within himself and with nature" into a state of anxiety and alienation in which human individuality is promoted through differentiation and antagonism within the self and with his physical environment [Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death*].

Self-consciousness shatters the primal unity between individual and species, independence and interdependence, union and isolation, and the end result of this division is anxiety. As the ultimate cause of repression and neurosis, anxiety thrives as the human response to separateness, individuality, and death. Anxiety builds up in that part of man which refuses to accept the insulation of individuality and rejects the finality of death.

This fragmentation of human nature breeds free-floating anxiety and nourishes man's estrangement from being. The ego or conscious will should be considered a social convention, not a psychological entity. The ego is an imaginary, socially fabricated self working against the whole organism, the biologically grown self. Isolation of the conscious will from the total organism spawns alienation. Thus, man lives in the symbolic self-image that he projects artificially rather than in the real self which is housed in his total organism. The attempt to adapt to life in an artificial way further separates him from his essential grounds of motivation. This fragmentation of man's functional processes distorts the individual's relation to his physical environment. As Norman O. Brown describes it, "civilized objectivity is non-participating consciousness, consciousness as separation, as dualism, distance, definition; as property and prison: consciousness ruled by negation, which is from the death instinct" [*Love's Body*].

Bartleby's consciousness is ruled by negation, a manifestation of the death instinct. His behavioral pattern involves passive resistance to everything. By refusing to act at all, for good or ill, Bartleby negates his reason for being. In existential terms, he *is* nothing (the sum of his actions), for he prefers to endure his suffering, without hope and without choice. By negating all alternatives, Bartleby abandons himself to a suicide of the will. He dies as a martyr to the futility of existence.

Bartleby's negation of the will is a kind of perversion of the Oriental doctrine of nonaction. This doctrine derives its substance from the belief that the self is merely an illusory fabrication which, when properly understood, dissolves into the maya of nonexistence. Thus, since the self doesn't really exist, action is an exercise in foolishness, and nonaction (contemplation) is the highest activity. But Bartleby's nonaction is the response of a diseased organism, a dying man. Freud's assertion that "a negative judgment is the intellectual substitute for repression" can be applied to the scrivener's everlasting *NO*.

Bartleby represents a fictional manifestation of the thanatos principle in Melville's consciousness. Throughout the narrative, Bartleby's passive resistance, absolute resignation, and specterlike appearance mark him as a tragic figure embodying the artist's submerged death wish. This is further illuminated by the biblical phrase which the narrator quotes over the prostrate form of the dead scrivener in the Tombs. Bartleby is indeed asleep "with kings and counsellors." Melville alludes to the Book of Job, specifically to Job's plaint, one of the most powerful poetic statements, rich in existential impact, in the Old Testament. An examination of the full text of Job's plaint significantly broadens the psychological horizons surrounding Melville's creation of Bartleby.

Job, unlike Bartleby, possesses a deeply moving lyrical voice to articulate the despair inflicted upon him by his manifold sorrows. Job wishes that the day of his birth would be annihilated. He asks for blackness, gloom, and darkness to obliterate its intolerable reality. He implores the night to be barren and joyless, and he wishes that he had perished upon emerging from the womb. Job bitterly expresses the death impulse when he desires that his existence had been stillborn or else aborted prior to his birth. He regards the dismal atmosphere of Sheol (the Hebrew version of hell) to be preferable to all the maladies of earthly life.

For now should I have lain still and been quiet, I should have slept; then had I been at rest,
With kings and counsellors of the earth, which built desolate places for themselves;
Job 3.13-14

Sheol's morbid monotony at least gives rest to the weary and means the cessation of all trouble for even the most wicked sinners. Job identifies himself with those who wait in agony for death and rejoice when they finally reach the tomb. Job begs for ease, peace, and a final rest, but he is denied all this.

For my sighing cometh before I eat, and my roarings are poured out like the waters.
For the thing which I feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me.
I was not in safety, neither had I rest, neither was I quiet; yet trouble came.
Job 3.24-26

The Book of Job concerns the problem of evil in the world. Job demands that God reveal the reason behind unjust human suffering. This is a thoroughly reasonable request. The dialectic of the Book of Job resolves itself solely through divine intervention. God cannot provide Job with a rational explanation of the problem of evil. But the fact that Job can see and hear the Lord saves him from the abyss of nothingness, and only because of this, he is willing to repent in dust and ashes before God. The experience of nothingness, rather than the problem of evil or unjust misery, is the true cause of despair. Because Job can substitute an inscrutable God for an impenetrable emptiness, he escapes the anxiety and alienation that overwhelms Bartleby.

The experience of nothingness, not the problem of evil, looms as the central issue in "Bartleby." It is not the power of blackness so much as the power of blankness that Melville depicts in his novella. Melville's chief symbol for the emptiness of existence is the series of dead, blank walls that enclose the scrivener within a repressive atmosphere throughout the tale. Melville relies upon architectural details and other physical references to convey his metaphysical observations. The Wall Street offices exhibit mute white walls in the interior and Bartleby's small side-window faces "a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade." The high green folding screen which the narrator employs to isolate Bartleby from his sight is another blank barrier prohibiting the free flow of life. Melville uses the expressionless impersonality of walls as graphic emblems of the forces that isolate and imprison man.

Melville forges a direct relationship between Bartleby's visual perception of the vacancy of existence and the constant anxiety that paralyzes his will. When the narrator finds Bartleby transfixed in a dead-wall reverie and preferring not to copy, the cursory reader may tend to overlook the scrivener's curious explanation—"Do you not see the reason for yourself?" Bartleby asks the narrator to open his eyes to the realization that the sensible world is only a panorama of illusions and therefore void of meaning. All organic life is enmeshed in a process of dying and decaying. This is the fundamental reality behind Bartleby's fixation on dead-wall vistas. Another glimpse of this concrete nihilistic vision occurs when the narrator tries to console the incarcerated Bartleby in the Tombs. The narrator assures him that the present moment is not unbearable and the future can be better. But Bartleby deflates all hope with his chilling remark: "I know where I am." The scrivener declines to transcend the rock-bottom reality of his human situation. He stands face to face with nothingness. The illusion of freedom is circumscribed and his doom is inevitable. Bartleby sees the world as a prison that can only be escaped through the pangs of death. Any hope for eternal life only begins a new round of meaningless illusions. Engulfed by anxiety and estrangement, Bartleby forlornly renounces his will to live.

Bartleby's conduct neutralizes his freedom of choice. He is a silent spectator, not an active participant, in the life he perpetually denies. Behind his green barrier, Bartleby barely exists—quietly, without external agitation, "oblivious to everything." "He was a perpetual sentry in the corner." The narrator considers Bartleby's plight an incurable disorder of the soul. The prolonged dead-wall reveries are transfixed emblems of hopeless spiritual suffering. Bartleby "prefers" to be stationary, an organic fixture sullenly composed behind his screen. "He seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe. A bit of wreck in the mid-Atlantic." Even as his tragic existence approaches its end, Bartleby still clings to his hopeless doctrine of nonaction. "The poor scrivener, when told that he must be conducted to the Tombs, offered not the slightest obstacle, but,

in his pale, unmoving way, silently acquiesced." Ultimately, Bartleby does lie down forever "with kings and counsellors."

Like Goethe's Mephistopheles, Bartleby is a "spirit that negates." His stolid "I would prefer not to" is completely divorced from the normal realm of human emotions. It's the muffled outcry of a pathetic victim—"pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn"—who prefers to dwell silently in his hermitage, oblivious to all but his own anguish. Bartleby is not only alienated from the barren world around him but also from the internal void of his existence. He is so estranged from his own being that "he had declined telling who he was, or whence he came, or whether he had any relatives in the world." To the narrator, Bartleby is the "sole spectator of a solitude"—a sort of "transformed Marius brooding among the ruins of Carthage!" Melville's reference to ruins in his story, especially when he likens the Tombs to Egyptian pyramids, again suggests the "waste places" of kings and counselors in the Book of Job. "Like the last column of some ruined temple, he remained standing mute and solitary in the middle of the otherwise deserted room." In this respect, Bartleby is a kind of inverted Ozymandias figure, silently protesting the ephemeral quality of man's life and works.

There is a double irony implicit in the humorous scene in which the narrator suggests an assortment of alternative occupations for Bartleby. Melville displays light comedy when the scrivener proclaims "I am not particular" three times after he refuses the series of choices. Bartleby's obstinate behavior contradicts the apathy of his assertion. But the scrivener's "I am not particular" also contradicts Bartleby's individuality, the disease of unnatural separation from the total organic life that afflicts him throughout the novella. It is because Bartleby *is* "particular" that he cannot be reintegrated into his physical environment. Bartleby's particularity is the result of the fragmentation, anxiety, and alienation which isolate him from the collective whole of humanity and annihilates his will to resist disintegration. For this reason, his reiterated response ("I am not particular") is doubly ironic.

On one level of interpretation, Bartleby stands as a fatalistic victim of the basic human predicament: individualized man confronted with nothingness and devastated by fragmentation, anxiety, and estrangement. But on another level of meaning, Bartleby and the narrator function as fictional projections that mirror the interior landscape of Melville's psyche—the debilitating tension between the death and life instincts.

Melville's language firmly establishes Bartleby as the personification of death. The scrivener is described as "motionless," "pallidly neat," "dismantled," "immovable," "haunting," "cadaverous"—all suggesting a corpse-like appearance. As the narrator observes, "the scrivener's pale form appeared to me laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding-sheet." Often portrayed as an "apparition" and "ghost," Bartleby casts a spectral shadow of gloom on the dead blank wall of Melville's stage. In the Tombs, Bartleby's corpse is a "wasted" prostrate body. The stifling atmosphere of the Tombs only intensifies the funereal character of Bartleby. "The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed." It is indeed a heart of darkness: dead in the center.

Just as Bartleby embodies thanatos, separation, the death instinct, Melville's narrator represents eros, the impulse toward unification, the life instinct in the author's psyche. The "life instinct also demands a union with others and with the world around us based not on anxiety and aggression" but on love, freedom, and the release of nervous tensions. "The principle of unification or interdependence sustains the immortal life of the species and the mortal life of the individual; the principle of separation or independence gives the individual his individuality and ensures his death" [Brown]. In this regard, the narrator acts as the agent of the life impulse to react against the death drive of Bartleby in Melville's literary dialectic.

Eros operates through the narrator's personality chiefly in the guise of Christian compassion. The theoretical Christian concern for the community of souls is diametrically opposed to Bartleby's heightened individuality

and the diseased consciousness it engenders. The greatest example of love for Melville, as it is for St. Paul, is the act of charity. Surely charity is the predominant virtue in the narrator's character. Time after time he offers substantial financial help to the morose scrivener with the promise of further aid. The narrator visits him in prison and sees to it that Bartleby will receive good treatment, should he "prefer" to accept it. The narrator exhibits generosity and selflessness in reaction to Bartleby's eccentricities. ". when this old Adam of resentment rose in me and tempted me concerning Bartleby, I grappled him and threw him.... simply by recalling the divine injunction: 'A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.' ... charity often operates as a vastly wise and prudent principle—a great safeguard to its possessor.... no man, that ever I heard of, ever committed a diabolical murder for sweet charity's sake. Mere self-interest, then, if no better motive can be enlisted, should ... prompt all beings to charity and philanthropy."

There is only one thing wrong with the narrator's charitable behavior toward Bartleby—it doesn't work. No amount of well-meaning humanitarianism can unravel the knot of tension built into the conflict of eros and thanatos in human nature. The narrator is most vulnerable to appeals to the bond of "fellow-feeling." He finds it difficult to divorce himself from Bartleby's plight. "The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam." Bartleby's corrosive individuality would not permit him to share this sentiment. His self is severed from its natural relation to life.

The narrator's original feeling of pity turns to repulsion when Bartleby's pervasive despair infects him with the hopelessness of ever relieving the scrivener's anguish. "Disarmed" and "unmanned" by Bartleby's fatalistic resignation, the narrator feels "sundry twinges of impotent rebellion" in the antagonism. Despite the constant sympathy he expresses for the scrivener, the narrator is overburdened by the afflictive "millstone" of Bartleby on his conscience. The cross is too heavy for this Christian to bear. "The scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder. I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach."

The narrator recognizes that Bartleby's pathetic condition is the cruel result of an existence "unhallowed by humanising domestic associations." He wants to draw Bartleby into his own sphere of interdependency, to meld together into a collective whole the scattered, fractured fragments of Bartleby's malignant consciousness. Yet reason tells him that the man he has abandoned should mean nothing to him. The narrator's gnawing sense of responsibility to the scrivener, which extends to the hour of Bartleby's death, is proof of the irreconcilably contrary forces of the life and death instincts at war in the human personality.

"Bartleby" is by no means an isolated nihilistic chronicle in the Melville canon. As early as 1849 Melville was preoccupied with the themes of alienation, nothingness, and self-annihilation. The author concludes *Mardi*, a probe into the validity of man's search for meaning, with a dithyrambic self-destruction of his questor-hero Taji: "Now I am my own soul's emperor; and my first act is abdication! Hail, realm of shades!" In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael, the only survivor of Ahab's Faustian assault on the power of blankness, is saved ironically by a coffin life buoy, after he has been spinning around in a slowly wheeling circle of water that suggests the spirals of Dante's *Inferno*. Melville compares Ishmael to Ixion, whose punishment was to slowly revolve on a wheel of fire in Tartarus for eternity. For Melville, the wheel of life rolls only to death and oblivion. *Pierre*, too, ends on a grotesque suicidal note in a dank prison where virtue goes unrewarded and all values devalue into nullity.

The years following the controversial publication of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* were dominated by an intense artistic and intellectual crisis in Melville's career. A period of deep dejection followed the critical attack on *Pierre*. Melville was plagued by a nagging sense of failure and many of the stories he wrote between 1853 and 1856 are tales of passive suffering, stoic endurance, renunciation, and defeat. "Bartleby" is chronologically the first of these stories, but was preceded by an impulsive burning of some of Melville's unsuccessful fictional works.

Three years after the publication of "Bartleby," Hawthorne records a revealing historical meeting with Melville in his *English Notebooks* on November 20, 1856. He observes:

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated"; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other.

Melville was caught in the self-torturing oscillations of his eros and thanatos impulses. The year after his despondent "annihilation" remark to Hawthorne, he wrote *The Confidence-Man*, the last work of prose fiction to be published in his lifetime. The final paragraph in this multifaceted novel is an inversion of the "Let it be" act of creation, as a solar lamp is extinguished—enshrouding *Fidele* (the ship of the world) in darkness—the final event in Melville's cosmological negation.

Melville ultimately recognized that his philosophic dilemma could not be resolved, but only endured. However, he did commit a kind of symbolic self-annihilation after 1857. For almost three decades he abandoned prose fiction rather than compromise his talent by producing potboilers to appease the demands of the public.

Melville's declining stature as a man of letters and the burning of some of his literary failures are partially reflected in the narrator's account of Bartleby's routine in the Dead Letter Office:

Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? For by the cart-load they are annually burned. Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.

"Bartleby" is the creation of a man who believed himself speeding toward certain annihilation. Melville's novella is a literary last resort to blunt the impact of his nihilistic vision. Enacting the tragic conflict between eros and thanatos in the human psyche, the two major characters in the story dramatize the modern predicament of the fragmentation, anxiety, and alienation of life. In the midst of his despair, Melville sensed his heightened artistic awareness in conflict with his bitter feeling of personal failure. Bartleby, the man who *is* nothing, emerges as a sullen sentinel to announce that Melville "would prefer not to" exist merely as a man of "dead letters."

Criticism: Milton Kornfeld (essay date 1975)

SOURCE: "Bartleby and the Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," in *Arizona Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Spring, 1975, pp. 51-6.

[In the following essay, Kornfeld claims that Bartleby is distinguished by his refusal to correspond to social roles.]

Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" has been read as an attack on capitalism, an allegory of the frustrated artist in a commercial society, a study of passive resistance, an expression of melancholy, the absurd, the perverse, the irrational—the catalog is exhausting and seemingly endless. Some of this is helpful in elucidating the story, even useful from the teacher's perspective since "Bartleby" is a perennial favorite of anthologizers. But a problem of many of the interpretations is a tendency toward the inverted reification of Bartleby as a character. The difficulty and the temptation of trying to explain him subtly enough reinforce the habit of treating him as an abstraction. Thus Newton Arvin sees Bartleby as the "irreducibly irrational in human existence ... the bitter metaphysical pathos of the human situation itself [*Herman Melville*], and Kingsley Widmer has called the story an expression of the "metaphysical inadequacy of the liberal rationalist," with Bartleby as the "forlorn negation and as the obsession of the benevolent rationalist's consciousness" ["The Negative Affirmation: Melville's 'Bartleby'"]. Indeed, both may be right, but imagine the consternation of a freshman or sophomore student as he tries to scale these verbal Everests, or the glassy-eyed stare with which he meets this abstract wisdom.

To restore the story to students and the general reader Bartleby must be confronted in his elusive yet concrete actuality. Widmer is correct, "Bartleby is" [*The Ways of Nihilism: A Study of Melville's Short Novels*], but what he hasn't elaborated is the actual way in which Bartleby is and *is not*.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, sociologist Erving Goffman presents a very useful theory of social interaction based on impression management. Simply stated, various contexts demand different kinds of behavior, different roles, and in most social situations performers as well as audiences are generally aware of these roles and their limitations. "When an individual appears before others, he knowingly and unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part." Anyone who has read the mad scene in *Hamlet* must be aware of this; Jane Austen was aware of it; any writer of stature has dealt with it at one time or another. Goffman continues: "When an event occurs which is expressively incompatible with this fostered impression, significant consequences are ... felt," and it is here that Bartleby's behavior becomes interesting.

Goffman theorizes that in society people sometimes adopt "dramaturgical strategies," play roles, and the role of Bartleby is *to play no role at all*. Like John Marcher in Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle," who was "the man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened," Bartleby is *the man* to whom no role was to accrue. He may be motivated by a desire to express the "metaphysical pathos of the human situation" or the absurd, to preserve his integrity, he may have any number of motives (hence the incredible range of interpretations the story has fostered), but exploring Bartleby's motives seems only to lead us away from the story into metaphysics. The problem in presenting Bartleby to students is to help them to see him as he *is*. By refusing to participate, by employing a "dramaturgical strategy" which none of the inhabitants of his world can understand or empathically relate to, Bartleby does seem to be the occupant of a "cosmic madhouse" [Arvin]. The results of this refusal to adopt a role are precisely those predicted by Goffman.

First, the social interaction, treated here as a dialogue between two teams, may come to an embarrassed and confused halt; the situation may cease to be defined, previous positions may become no longer tenable, and participants may find themselves without a charted course of action. The participants typically sense a false note in the situation and come to feel awkward, flustered, and, literally, out of countenance. In other words, the minute social system created and sustained by orderly social interaction becomes disorganized.

Clearly, the lawyer and his clerks react in just such a manner; as the situation ceases to be defined they find themselves confronted with an ambiguity, a void, a presence of absence. It is as if Bartleby were the human incarnation of the whiteness of the whale "as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color." Bartleby is not so much a character as the *visible absence* of character, and by his indefiniteness he "shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe." In *Moby-Dick* ghostly

whiteness "imparts ... an abhorrent mildness" to the polar bear and the shark, but to the relatively unmetaphysical narrator of "Bartleby," the scrivener's "mildness" is a "wonderful mildness ... which not only disarmed me, but unmanned me as it were." There is something peculiar at work in Melville's use of adjectives in these two quotations. In *Moby-Dick* the shark and polar bear are clearly abhorrent, but in "Bartleby" the lawyer perceives the scrivener's mildness as wonderful; yet this mildness leads to his being disarmed and unmanned, essentially the same consequences suffered by Ahab at the jaws of the abhorrent white whale. The lawyer's use of "wonderful" conceals an anger and an unintended irony many fathoms below the surface.

In choosing not to choose a role the "motionless young man" confounds the expectations of his audience. To the simple-minded Ginger Nut, Bartleby is "a little *lunny*," and to the irascible Nippers he is a "stubborn mule," and from their limited perspectives, like the readers of the doubloon in *Moby-Dick*, they are right. Refusing to do as he is asked, to copy, to read proof, to divulge any biographical information about himself, and finally to eat, Bartleby steadfastly remains roleless and in ordinary clinical parlance assumes the characteristics of catatonic madness. If Bartleby's condition were so neatly clinical, however, the story would have lost its appeal long ago. The lawyer's perception that Bartleby seemed "alone, absolutely alone in the universe. A bit of wreck in the mid-Atlantic," allows the story to carry a great deal of metaphysical freight. Like Pip who fell overboard in *Moby-Dick* and in his solitary swim saw "God's foot upon the treadle of the loom," Bartleby's dead-wall stare seems fixed on more than bricks.

What makes this role-playing hypothesis such an interesting one is the way it dovetails with the rest of the story. Not only do the other characters come under its rubric, but it helps explain a comic and heretofore unexplained paragraph toward the end of the story which balances the lugubrious and often criticized last paragraph.

The difficulty Bartleby presents to his audience, what makes them feel so "awkward, flustered, and, literally, out of countenance" [Goffman], results from their being such expert role players, and hence unequipped to deal with someone who plays no role at all. The lawyer, who deals among "rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and tithedeeds," is an "eminently *safe* man." He is conservative, trustworthy, a man whose character can be easily read and relied upon to remain the same. His disapproval of change, his commitment to the *status quo* and a unified role is evident at the very outset of the story in his display of grief at the "abrogation of the office of Master in Chancery," a sinecure (role) he expected to hold (play) for the rest of his life.

As a solid citizen deeply entrenched in his role, he is the very last person who could understand someone who has no role at all, and his efforts to force Bartleby into some definable position are evidence of the anxiety this confrontation with his inverted mirror image causes. His is the frustration of the achievement-oriented upper-middleclass parent confronted by his child the "drop out," whose plans for the future are to do nothing, have no role and experience life for a while as a free-form polymorph. Even when the lawyer does change, when his compassion and humanity are enlarged, his change is surreptitious. He doesn't want to do anything to disrupt his practice since "necessities connected with my business tyrannised over all other considerations."

Between the poles of Bartleby and the lawyer are Nippers and Turkey:

It was fortunate for me that, owing to its peculiar cause—indigestion—the irritability and consequent nervousness of Nippers were mainly observable in the morning, while in the afternoon he was comparatively mild. So that, Turkey's paroxysms only coming on about twelve o'clock, I never had to do with their eccentricities at one time. Their fits relieved each other, like guards. When Nipper's was on, Turkey's was off; and *vice versa*.

These chameleon antics are only tolerable because they balance each other and because, in Goffman's terms, their predictability allows the lawyer to make the necessary accommodations in his perceptions of social

reality. Bizarre as they may be, Nippers and Turkey still play definable and useful roles. But like the Cyclops who is fooled by Ulysses's trick of calling himself No-man, the lawyer, figuratively, cannot perceive or comprehend a man who has no role.

Melville's final comment on Bartleby's role-playing comes in a comic aside when the lawyer is talking to the grub man in the Tombs. In response to the lawyer's suggestion that Bartleby might be deranged, the grub man says:

"Deranged? deranged is it? Well, now, upon my word, I thought that friend of yours was a gentleman forger; they are always pale and genteel-like, them forgers. I can't help pity 'em—can't help it, sir. Did you know Monroe Edwards?" he added touchingly, and paused. Then laying his hand piteously on my shoulder, sighed, "he died of consumption at Sing-Sing. So you weren't acquainted with Monroe?"

Aside from expressing a degree of spontaneous pity in contrast to the lawyer's restrained feelings, why should the grub man think Bartleby a "gentleman forger" (forger of gentlemen?) instead of a thief, for instance? Could Melville be grimly punning at this point as Shakespeare has Hamlet do in the cemetery? Monroe Edwards died of consumption, of overdoing it as a forger, otherwise he wouldn't have been caught; and Bartleby dies of under-consumption, of refusing to eat, of refusing to forge any roles, in the manner of Kafka's Hunger Artist. In a world in which role-playing and reality are coextensive, refusing to play roles is a repudiation of what passes for reality, and those of us who refuse to play are relegated to the Tombs.

I have not tried to alter the metaphysics of Melville's tale; in fact the reverberations from *Moby-Dick* actually reinforce that dimension of the story. Instead, this is an attempt to provide an explanation of "Bartleby" which is descriptive, cross-disciplinary, and in touch with the strange dramatic fluctuations in the story.

Criticism: Allan Moore Emery (essay date 1976)

SOURCE: "The Alternatives of Melville's 'Bartleby,'" in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 31, No. 2, September, 1976, pp. 170-87.

[In the following essay, Emery explores themes of freedom and limitation in "Bartleby," particularly emphasizing the doctrines of Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Priestly.]

In recent years Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" has attracted its share of critics, many of whom have rightly proclaimed the tale to be an ingenious treatment of the theme of freedom and limitation. Nevertheless, two questions of preëminent importance remain unanswered: What is the precise nature of Bartleby's revolt? And how ought we to characterize the narrator's response to his mysterious clerk?

It seems to me that we can most easily answer these questions if we approach Melville's tale contextually. The Herman Melville of 1853 was, after all, hardly an illiterate sailor; and no small portion of his knowledge of philosophy, theology, and literature appears to have gone into the making of "Bartleby." If we disregard this knowledge and slight the tale's intellectual roots, we shall inevitably miss much of the author's meaning; in fact, however diligently we may examine the story's surface, we shall continue, I think, to muddle through "Bartleby" as readers and to lapse into an embarrassing vagueness as critics. To be sure, a handful of scholars have endeavored to explore the tale's context. Yet those who have investigated the philosophical backgrounds—those backgrounds to be treated here—have failed thus far to recognize the care with which Melville read his sources and the precision with which he used them in "Bartleby." To understand the contextual basis of Melville's tale is only to make a beginning: we must be prepared to devote a good deal of attention to what may at first seem thoroughly irrelevant and obscure materials if our scholarship is to aid us

in interpreting "Bartleby." But happily the critical payoffs are there: a brief consideration of Melville's sources not only sheds immediate light on his creative intentions and enhances our enjoyment of his tale, but also enables us to recognize "Bartleby" for what it clearly is—one of the most impressive achievements in the history of short fiction.

Jonathan Edwards, Puritan minister and theologian, and Joseph Priestley, chemist and free-thinking Unitarian, had little in common, but they agreed, nevertheless, in assaulting the notion of man's "free will." Edwards' *Freedom of the Will* and Priestley's *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated* argued, quite similarly in fact, that "free will," instead of being a concept readily understood and clearly exemplified by everyday human decision-making, was an absurd idea, impossible either to comprehend or define. One might briefly paraphrase the argument of the two philosophers this way. (1) For the will to be absolutely free would require its perfect isolation at any moment of decision—its separation from all such mental "determinants" as emotions, habits, dispositions, and general behavioral principles. Since these things are quite vulnerable to the influences of the physical body, external nature, and other people, they would, if allowed to affect decisions, make those decisions "determined"—caused by something outside the will. (2) But if the will were separated from the rest of the mind at all moments of decision, it would inevitably then be separated as well from the grounds upon which decisions ought to rest; thus if the will were indeed "self-determining," it would be given over, in effect, to a random, indeterminate, and essentially uncontrollable procedure.

Although the advocates of "free will" claimed to be espousing an intermediate position between the supposedly stifling "Determinism" and "Necessity" of Edwards and Priestley, on the one hand, and a chaotic indeterminism on the other, Edwards and Priestley insisted that no such position was possible. Either, they suggested, the will could be influenced by emotions, habits, and so on, in which case it was most certainly not "free," or else it could be influenced by nothing other than itself, in which case it was indeed "free," but only in the unpleasant sense of being a tiny nugget of indeterminate chance in the core of the mind. Edwards and Priestley insisted, in short, that the man without "free will" was the sort of man one saw everywhere; while the man with "free will" would have been for them "a creature that had no resemblance to the human race ... a most bizarre and unaccountable being, a mere absurdity in nature."

The narrator of "Bartleby" is acquainted with the treatises of Edwards and Priestley. In fact, he "looks into" them at one point in the story and takes comfort in knowing that his difficulties with Bartleby have been "predestinated from eternity." Had the narrator looked into the treatises a little more closely, however, he would surely have discovered something else: he would have seen that in their energetic description of the absurdities of "free will," Edwards and Priestley were predicting the absurdities of precisely such a being as Bartleby. The reference to Edwards and Priestley is, as it turns out, a vital clue to the philosophical context within which Melville meant his tale to be read.

Bartleby, we recall, is a peculiarly enigmatic character. His past, if we disregard the "Dead Letter Office" rumor, is forever hidden; his emotions remain concealed; his general motivations go undivulged. Yet if we cannot uncover Bartleby's secrets, we can see, superficially at least, why he persists in being a mystery: when questioned by the narrator or when asked to perform some action Bartleby customarily responds simply with an expression of "preference," for which word, after referring to the opening of Edwards' treatise, we can legitimately substitute "will."

Bartleby is, in fact, an exceedingly willful individual; yet his powerful will seems completely inexpressive of the remainder of his mind. That he has memories, emotional responses, and general motivations is possible; but if so, we have no reason ever to believe that these influence his "preferences." Indeed, Bartleby seems to prefer a thing simply because he prefers it; his will, that is, seems "self-determined"; and hence he appears to be just that sort of incredible "creature" envisioned by Edwards and Priestley—a man whose will is free of the mental "determinants" which those philosophers insisted were a factor in the decision-making of every human being.

We recall that Melville's narrator has great problems in managing Bartleby and is forced to employ numerous arguments with him—arguments of custom, duty, "reasonableness," and legality, to name a few. But as the narrator laments at one point: "It seemed to me that, while I [was] addressing him, he carefully revolved every statement that I made; fully comprehended the meaning; could not gainsay the irresistible conclusion; but, at the same time, some paramount consideration prevailed with him to reply as he did." Bartleby's reason appears then to acquiesce in the face of the narrator's arguments; yet strangely enough, his perverse "preferences" continue. This, however, ought not to surprise us. The "paramount consideration" which lies behind Bartleby's refusals is evidently, as suggested earlier, a desire, previously fixed upon, to free his will from *everything* external to it, including all other motivations, and including his reason. One can then convince Bartleby's reason and have no consequent effect upon his "preferences"; for in order to establish the freedom of his will, Bartleby must prefer not to be normal, dutiful, reasonable, law-abiding, and anything else that would require his will to knuckle under to some "determining" consideration. Indeed, one suspects that when Bartleby seems to disregard his self-interest in rejecting first the narrator's offers of assistance and later the grubman's "dinners," it is because not even a concern for his own welfare can be allowed to influence his will.

The narrator does have a problem on his hands, as the following conversation demonstrates:

"[Bartleby,] would you like to re-engage in copying for some one?"

"No; I would prefer not to make any change."

"Would you like a clerkship in a dry-goods store?"

"There is too much confinement about that. No, I would not like a clerkship; but I am not particular."

"Too much confinement," I cried, "why you keep yourself confined all the time!"

"I would prefer not to take a clerkship," he rejoined...

"How would a bar-tender's business suit you?" ...

"I would not like it at all; though, as I said before, I am not particular."

... "How, then, would going as a companion to Europe, to entertain some young gentleman with your conversation—how would that suit you?"

"Not at all. It does not strike me that there is anything definite about that. I like to be stationary. But I am not particular."

The best gloss on this perplexing bit of dialogue seems to be the following passage from Edwards' treatise on the will:

Now the question is, whether ever the soul of man puts forth an act of Will, while it yet remains in a state of Liberty.... For how ridiculous would it be for any body to insist, that the soul chooses one thing before another, when at the very same instant it is perfectly indifferent with respect to each! This is the same thing as to say, the soul prefers one thing to another, at

the very same time that it has no preference.

Edwards argued that if the definition of "free will" required the will to be isolated at the moment of decision, if it insisted, in other words, that the will be "indifferent" in that moment with respect to its alternative choices, then the definition was absurd—since an indifferent will could clearly never come to a decision. The "free" Bartleby, we notice, denies repeatedly his "particularity" of opinion, yet proves to be highly particular with respect to his occupational possibilities. He is simultaneously indifferent and not indifferent; and this paradox seems to result from the paradox inherent in "free will" (as Edwards and Priestley defined it): the decisions of the "free" will had to issue out of a state of perfect indecision. Thus in the conversation just cited, Bartleby may appear to exhibit reasons for his preferences, but these "reasons" are merely momentarily significant, at times contradictory, and certainly not expressive of any sort of *general* motivation or behavioral determinant. Despite his preferences, Bartleby's only "determination" is to remain "not particular"—for he must remain so in order to be "free."

There is more to be said, however, on the subject of Bartleby's intractability. Edwards and Priestley were aware of the objection most frequently urged against their "deterministic" psychological models—namely, that these models seemed to eliminate human moral responsibility. If all a man's actions were determined through the natural causal chains which Edwards and Priestley thought to be operating, then was it not improper, the proponents of "free will" asked, either to reward or punish a man for a decision in which he participated only as a causal link and not as a "free" initiator? Edwards and Priestley answered that only a determined act could properly be labeled "moral" or "immoral." They pointed out that it was man's long-standing custom to punish those who had evil motives, habits, and dispositions rather than those who for no apparent reason performed evil acts, which seemed to suggest that the common notion of morality was heavily dependent upon the idea of mental "determinants." Moreover, turning the logic of the free-willers upside down, Edwards and Priestley went on to insist that "free will," if it were achieved, would make its possessor morally irresponsible for his actions, since these would then be "decided upon" not by his whole mind but by chance.

Priestley treated the problem of moral responsibility by imagining that he were a father desirous of morally evaluating and educating two hypothetical sons. With the first, "son A," whose will was not "free," and who could thus be influenced in his behavior and decision-making by considerations of self-interest, affection for others, fear of punishment, and so on, Priestley had no problem; but with his second hypothetical child, equipped with "free will," there were difficulties:

In my son B I have to do with a creature of quite another make.... In all cases where the principle of *freedom from the certain influence of motives* takes place, it is exactly an equal chance whether.. my promises or threatenings, my rewards or punishments determine his actions or not. The *self-determining power* is ... a thing with respect to which I can make no sort of calculation.... When I ... praise my son A, [I] tell him [I] admire his *excellent disposition*, in consequence of which all good motives have a ... never-failing influence upon his mind. his conduct is not directed by mere *will*.... Let us now suppose that B does the very same thing [as A]; but let it be fully understood, that the *cause* of his right determination was not any bias or *disposition of mind* in favour of virtue, or because a good *motive* influenced him to do it; but that his determination was produced by ... a mere *arbitrary pleasure*, without any reason whatever ... and I apprehend he would no more be thought a proper subject of praise ... than the dice, which, by a fortunate throw, should give a man an estate. It is true that the action was right, but there was not the *proper principle*, and *motive*, which are the only just foundations of praise.

Priestley's situation becomes even more interesting, however, when both sons are guilty of misconduct. After having successfully disciplined "son A," Priestley notes:

If son B has acted the same part [as A], the language which I addressed to A will not apply to [B]. It is true that he has done what is wrong ... but it was not from any bad *disposition of mind*.... No, his determination ... was a choice directed by *no bad motive whatever*, but a mere *will*.... My blame or reproaches, therefore, being ill founded, and incapable of having any effect, it is my wisdom to withhold them, and wait the uncertain issue with patience.

Bartleby is quite clearly, I think, a version of "son B." We remember that his ability to perform his duties varies remarkably. Upon entering the office, he works furiously, although "silently, palely, mechanically." The narrator remarks that he would have been "delighted" with Bartleby had the latter's dedication been the behavioral expression of a cheery or industrious disposition; but Bartleby simply works on, giving no evidence of any disposition at all. Then he begins to "prefer not," augmenting his refusals little by little, until finally he stops work altogether. But just as the narrator had previously found it strangely difficult to praise the eminently busy, but oddly unmotivated Bartleby, so he now finds it hard to punish him:

I looked at him steadfastly. His face was leanly composed; his gray eye dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. But as it was.. I stood gazing at him awhile, as he went on with his own writing, and then reseated myself at my desk. This is very strange, thought I. What had one best do?

The narrator's predicament is precisely that of Priestley in the face of the contrariness of "son B"; for neither Bartleby's initial good behavior nor his later recalcitrance appears to originate in any motive or disposition (other than, as we have come to suspect, the "disposition" to be "unmotivated"). Like Priestley, the narrator finds it both oddly improper and decidedly ineffectual to reward or punish his employee; like Priestley, he can do nothing but postpone a decision on the matter and patiently "wait the uncertain issue."

The narrator might recall, by the way, that he did not have such difficulties with his three original employees—Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut—whose most essential characteristic is their clear difference from Bartleby with respect to *will*. Turkey, who regularly becomes irascible in the afternoon, Nippers, whose unfortunate mornings the narrator attributes to a combination of "ambition and indigestion," and Ginger Nut, a boy remarkable only for his craving for nuts, are clear examples of what Priestley would have called "type-A" humanity; for their behavior is noted for its great dependence on disposition. These are human beings whose physical bodies, for instance, frequently influence their wills, whereas Bartleby's body has no known effect upon his "preferences." Like Priestley's "son A" the three perform predictably, so predictably that although their performance may at times fail to measure up to the standards set by their employer, the latter, confident in the consistency of their behavior, can discipline them amiably and effectively. [In his "Melville's 'Bartleby': Absolutism, Predestination, and Free Will,] Richard Harter Fogle is quite right then: the three do seem reminiscent of Dickensian "humors characters"—but only because Melville intended their wills to be clearly determined by dispositions, habits, and, if you like, "humors," and not by the self-determinative process we see at work in the case of Bartleby's paradoxical will.

Both Bartleby's eccentricity and his unmanageability then can be traced to his "free" will; but certain questions remain. If Bartleby has "free will" and Edwards and Priestley insisted that it could not exist, then why does Bartleby? Is Melville's tale merely the surrealistic dramatization of an incoherent philosophical postulate? The answer is clearly "No." Although Bartleby himself is absurd, just as Edwards and Priestley predicted, his desire is, after all, simply to maximize his freedom of mind; and thus he can be interpreted as the surrealistic representative of a great number of quite real rebels. Indeed, Melville seems to have meant the psychological cul-de-sac into which Bartleby strays to exemplify the ineffectual and distinctly risky nature of all intellectual rebellion.

For what does Bartleby's ill-fated career teach us? It suggests that the rebel who seeks to achieve a greater freedom of mind is, in effect, imposing upon himself a kind of mental paralysis; for in disengaging his will from even one of the emotions, dispositions, and habits that ordinarily influence it, the rebel, any rebel, must, like Bartleby, sever one of the causal connections by which his will is energized. Moreover, the rebel can maintain his freedom only so long as he continues to reject as potentially "determining" all behavioral motives, "reasonable" or otherwise; but ironically enough, having refused to obey the dictates of any particular motive, the rebel discovers to his chagrin that his will is now *less* free (by one alternative) than it was before.

On "Bartleby" as social commentary:

The plain figure of Bartleby, considered dispassionately, is absurd enough; but in his context he is so disruptive of all normally-accepted conventions that the emotional power and sanction of such a steady refusal as his must be regarded as one of Melville's most original discoveries. The insidious webs that the complexity of Society was spinning round the individual were being steadily multiplied in the fifties of the last century....

In "Bartleby" the stoic conclusion was faced, in a compressed and haunting prose piece containing as much of pity as of horror: that the courageous way out of the fatal dilemmas was independence, and that independence led to death. Bartleby the scrivener finds peace only in the grave—with the attendant consolation that he rests with kings and counsellors. Yet somehow Bartleby emerges from his own tragedy as the victor; he creates, but does not participate in, the spiritual disturbance which has quickened the imagination of the mediocrities he encounters. He becomes the still point about which their unstable world turns. The paradox of Bartleby is that although his principles destroy him, it is the preservation of those principles alone which can save the world that rejects him.

Ronald Mason, in The Spirit Above the Dust: A Study of Herman Melville, John Lehmann, 1951.

This then is the paradoxical moral of Melville's tale: the rebel's quest for freedom of mind must inevitably involve him in a life of ever-increasing limitations. By the end of our story, Bartleby, for all his humorous absurdity, has come to a not very humorous end. Total freedom of mind can apparently be attained only at the cost of life itself—and any rebel, Melville implies, is somewhere on the road to Bartleby's unfortunate destination.

Melville may have derived Bartleby's negative preferences from John Locke, Edwards' chief foe in *Freedom of the Will*, who sought to locate man's liberty in his "freedom to prefer"; or they may have come from Arthur Schopenhauer's theory of the "freedom of not-willing," as Daniel Stempel and Bruce M. Stillians have suggested [in their "'Bartleby the Scrivener': A Parable of Pessimism"]. But in either case, it is Edwards' and Priestley's sense of the absurdity of absolute freedom of mind and Melville's own recognition of the psychological dangers involved in the quest for it that seem to have dominated Melville's attitude toward his protagonist. And whether Bartleby is meant to stand for the Byronic hero, whom he resembles in his solitary, brooding pessimism, and with whom he is subtly compared at one point; whether he is meant to represent the contemplative mystic, as H. Bruce Franklin has asserted [in his *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology*]; whether he is intended to be Melville himself, perhaps conscious of too "freely" pondering certain disagreeable facts of human existence; or whether, as seems to me most likely, Bartleby is capacious enough to stand for all of these; in any case, his rebellion can clearly end for Melville only in philosophical confusion and psychological disaster.

To say this of "Bartleby" is not to say enough, however. The catastrophe that abruptly ends the monomaniacal career of Ahab in *Moby-Dick* demonstrates in a powerful fashion the essential futility of Ahab's quest; yet the comfortable way of the "Lee Shore" remains for Melville an unsatisfactory alternative to that quest. And

similarly, if half the ironic artillery of "Bartleby" is aimed and fired at the protagonist, the quester for an absolute freedom of mind, there is an equally potent attack launched squarely in the opposite direction—at the "comfortable" alternative to Bartleby, the narrator of the tale.

The physical walls within which Bartleby's story happens, those walls which so bother and bewilder Bartleby, have become so natural a part of the narrator's world that he is scarcely conscious of their existence. And this is a sign of something more significant; for after having glanced at the treatises of Edwards and Priestley, the narrator remarks:

Under the circumstances, those books induced a salutary feeling. Gradually I slid into the persuasion that these troubles of mine, touching the scrivener, had been all predestinated from eternity, and Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an allwise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like me to fathom. Yes, Bartleby, stay there behind your screen, thought I... At last, I see it, I feel it; I penetrate to the predestinated purpose of my life. I am content.

With his beliefs in Providence and predestination the narrator places himself philosophically in the camp of Edwards and Priestley; but more importantly, his cheery response to the limits imposed upon him by his philosophy, his reveling in the deterministic "walls" which limit both his freedom and his vision, suggests to us the equally cheery response of those philosophers. Keeping the narrator's declaration of contentedness in mind, let us listen for a moment to Priestley, for instance:

We ourselves, complex as the structure of our minds, and our principles of action are, are links in a great connected chain, parts of an immense whole, a very little of which only we are as yet permitted to see, but from which we collect evidence enough, that the whole system.. is under unerring direction, and that the final result will be most glorious and happy....

And when our will and our wishes shall ... perfectly coincide with those of the sovereign Disposer of [that system] ... we shall, in fact, attain the summit of perfection and happiness.

This is the blithe sort of attitude which Melville apparently intended to satirize in creating "Bartleby"'s narrator. While Melville found himself siding with Edwards and Priestley in their insistence upon the difficulties of "free will," he could not understand, it seems, their ability to rejoice in their deterministic bonds. A rigorously determined world did not seem to Melville an environment particularly conducive to "perfection and happiness"; in fact, in creating "Bartleby" he chose to depict Priestley's glorious necessitarian "system" as a labyrinth of bleak and claustrophobic walls. Perhaps the limitations of mental necessity were inescapable; but Melville, as pessimistic realist, as a man deeply aware of certain hints of ineptitude in the "unerring direction" of the universe, and as something of a rebel himself, could not help but sympathize strongly, I imagine, with a Bartleby who attempted to break the shackles of his mental confinement—one who questioned life even if no answers were forthcoming, one who sought to pass beyond the walls of his mind rather than bask ignorantly like our narrator in the blissful nonvision of an incomprehensible Providence.

Thus while Bartleby's flaw is his radical refusal to undergo the imposition of psychological limits, the narrator's unattractiveness stems from his readiness to accept them. Yet there is a good deal more wrong with the narrator than his philosophical stance: in his case, a dead-wall epistemology is bonded to a particularly subtle (and hence pernicious) form of immorality. Despite the narrator's frequent recourse to benevolent rhetoric and despite the common critical view which has characterized him as a somewhat befuddled but thoroughly sincere exponent of Christian charity, the alert reader of "Bartleby" must quickly recognize that the narrator's heart is no more right than his head.

In portraying the narrator's moral sense Melville seems to have relied heavily upon the moral theory of Jonathan Edwards, with whom the narrator was already linked philosophically. In his [*The Nature of True Virtue*] Edwards argued that "natural virtue" (based in man's love for himself), like "true virtue" (arising out of the redemptive effects of God's grace), was capable of producing good behavior; in fact, self-love, in Edwards' view, was not the bane of mankind some moralists thought it to be. Edwards wrote:

A man may, from self-love, disapprove the vices of malice, envy, and others of that sort, which naturally tend to the hurt of mankind.... May he not from the same principle approve the contrary virtues of meekness, peaceableness, benevolence, charity, generosity, justice, and the social virtues in general.... It is undoubtedly true that some have a love to these virtues from a higher principle. But yet I think it as certainly true that there is generally in mankind a sort of approbation of them, which arises from self-love.

The narrator of "Bartleby" could well be thinking of that particular passage when, after fearing momentarily one afternoon that he might murder Bartleby out of frustration, he remembers the biblical injunction which exhorts men to "love one another" and remarks:

Aside from higher considerations, charity often operates as a vastly wise and prudent principle—a great safeguard to its possessor. Men have committed murder for jealousy's sake, and anger's sake, and hatred's sake, and selfishness' sake, and spiritual pride's sake; but no man, that ever I heard of, ever committed a diabolical murder for sweet charity's sake. Mere self-interest, then, if no better motive can be enlisted, should, especially with high-tempered men, prompt all beings to charity and philanthropy.

The narrator clearly knows his Edwards—but perhaps not so well as he might; for although Edwards did admit that in the absence of better motives, self-interest might induce a "sort of approbation" of virtue, he quickly went on to say this:

[Nothing] wherein consists the sense of moral good and evil which there is in natural conscience, is of the nature of a truly virtuous taste....

[For it] is approved ... in the same manner as men ... like those things with which they habitually connect the ideas of profit, pleasantness, comfortableness, etc. This sort of approbation ... is easily mistaken for true virtue ... [but] the difference [lies] in this, that it is not from love to Being in general, but from self-love.

Melville's narrator, however, goes so far as to suggest that "sweet charity" can issue out of self-love—or, more precisely, that a love for others can be founded, in his own case, upon the self-interested "prudence" which, we have been assured, is one of his strong points. We might well ask, with Edwards, if this brand of "charity" be not somewhat *too* sweet; and certainly Melville had no difficulty in locating the snake hidden within the profusion of the narrator's moralistic rhetoric. Self-interest could perhaps produce an easy sort of benevolence; but like Edwards, Melville seems to have felt that only a "higher principle" could promote an honest sympathy for other people. A love rooted in self-interest was apparently for Melville hardly a love at all.

Thus we begin to understand more fully Bartleby's sullen unresponsiveness in the face of the narrator's persistent offers of friendship: these offers are motivated, as Bartleby seems instinctively able to recognize, by selfishness masquerading as "charity." The following self-serving reflection on the part of the narrator is typical:

I regarded Bartleby and his ways. Poor fellow! thought I, he means no mischief; it is plain he intends no insolence.... He is useful to me. 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. Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby ... will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience.

The narrator is by no means the incarnation of outrageous cruelty or greed: at times he seems to achieve a certain degree of concern for Bartleby. But unfortunately his is always that tepid love, that oh-so-practical love, that always prudent love which Bartleby quite rightly views as dubious.

What does the narrator *lack* morally? His bust of Cicero is perhaps the best clue to that:

The next morning came....

"Bartleby," said I ... "come here; I am not going to ask you to do anything you would prefer not to do—I simply wish to speak to you."

Upon this he noiselessly slid into view.

"Will you tell me, Bartleby, where you were born?"

"I would prefer not to."

"Will you tell me *anything* about yourself?"

"I would prefer not to."

"But what reasonable objection can you have to speak to me? I feel friendly towards you."

He did not look at me while I spoke, but kept his glance fixed upon my bust of Cicero, which, as I then sat, was directly behind me, some six inches above my head.

Since Cicero was himself an eminent barrister, it is not surprising that the narrator possesses a bust of him. Yet that bust is, in one sense, grossly out of place in the narrator's office; for Cicero (in his treatise on moral duties, his [*Three Books of Offices or Moral Duties*]) wrote as follows:

If a man should lay down as the chief good, that which has no connexion with virtue, and measure [virtue] by his own interests, and not according to its moral merit; if such a man shall act consistently with his own principles, [but] is not sometimes influenced by the goodness of his heart, he can cultivate neither friendship, justice, nor generosity.

Unlike Edwards, Cicero maintained, in fact, that without a measure of fellow feeling unadulterated with self-love there could be no virtue of *any* kind. Hence Bartleby's meaningful glance at Cicero seems to be both Melville's way of endorsing Cicero's objection to the sort of "virtue" Edwards would later call "natural" and Bartleby's stubborn way of insisting that the self-interested narrator, "friendly" as he is, lacks the essence of "sweet charity"—a sympathetic heart.

But now we come to a crucial question. Does the narrator's encounter with Bartleby bring him to a state of increased awareness? Does Bartleby, in other words, make a better man out of the narrator? The affirmative case has been frequently argued, with the following remarks, made by the narrator in the course of examining the contents of Bartleby's desk, usually cited as proof:

What miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! [Bartleby's] poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible! Think of it. Of a Sunday, Wall-Street is deserted as Petra; and every night of every day it is an emptiness.... And here Bartleby makes his home.... For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not unpleasing sadness. The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam. I remembered the bright silks and sparkling faces I had seen that day, in gala trim, swan-like sailing down the Mississippi of Broadway; and I contrasted them with the pallid copyist, and thought to myself, Ah, happiness courts the light, so we deem the world is gay; but misery hides aloof, so we deem that misery there is none. These sad fancyings—chimeras, doubtless, of a sick and silly brain—led on to other and more special thoughts, concerning the eccentricities of Bartleby. Presentiments of strange discoveries hovered round me. The scrivener's pale form appeared to me laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding sheet.

To be sure, there are clear signs here that Bartleby has had some effect upon his employer: the narrator is, in fact, glimpsing "for the first time in his life" what Melville liked to call the "dark" side of human existence. But glimmerings of awareness are only glimmerings—and ought not to be confused with epistemological or moral rejuvenation. Both the narrator's comfortable glance at Edwards and Priestley and his statement in praise of self-interest are, we recall, still to come; and even here, at his best, the narrator cannot quite rid his benevolence of sentimentality; nor focus his wandering attention on possible ways of improving Bartleby's unfortunate situation; nor pass beyond "sad fancyings" and gothic imaginings into the more warm-blooded, though sometimes painful realm of genuine human feeling. And if, by the end of Melville's tale, we continue to cherish the notion that the perplexing confrontations with his mysterious clerk have managed to produce a significant dent in the narrator's obtuseness, we are doomed to disappointment; for the narrator attains new heights of vague sentimentality rather than a peak of awareness in his climactic and highly revealing sigh: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" Morally and epistemologically speaking, "strange discoveries" have indeed "hovered round" the narrator at times; but his chances for permanent improvement are apparently laid to rest forever in Bartleby's grave.

Who then is Melville's narrator? 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. Hence he is, as Melville well knew, precisely the sort of individual next to whom a Bartleby, however deranged and doomed, appears to us most admirable, most nearly heroic.

"Bartleby" is preëminently, then, a story of psychological polarities, of two views of life, unsatisfactory in themselves (though for very different reasons) and forever incapable of synthesis. And thus, in one important respect, "Bartleby" manifests a greater pessimism than does *Moby-Dick*: it may display a "Dickensian" mildness of tone and a web of humorous ironies that the "Shakespearian" tragedy of Ahab seems to lack; but it has, nevertheless, no Ishmael. From out of the wreck of Bartleby's quest, no one "steps forth"; the only survivor of Bartleby's catastrophe is the narrator, placid and uncomprehending to the end, firmly entrenched on the "Lee Shore." In "Bartleby" Edwards and Priestley, Melville and we his readers are fashioned into two representative individuals—a comfortable lawyer and his uncomfortable clerk—who meet, disturb each other for a time, and go their widely separate ways. Obliviousness or oblivion—those are the alternatives of "Bartleby."

Criticism: Robert E. Abrams (essay date 1978)

SOURCE: "'Bartleby' and the Fragile Pageantry of the Ego," in *ELH*, Vol. 45, No. 3, Fall, 1978, pp. 488-500.

[In the following essay, Abrams contrasts *Bartleby's* acceptance of his involuntary and subconscious motivation with the social and "willful hypocrisies" of the narrator.]

Probing the "mysterious" wellsprings of preference and motive, Melville observes in *Pierre* that "no mere mortal who has ... gone down into himself will ever pretend that his slightest ... act originates in his own defined identity." An innocuous but involuntary habit, for example, can sneak up on one unawares. Man's "texture," writes Melville, "is very porous, and things assumed upon the surface, at last strike in" and become his own; "insensibly" his mind is "disposed" to perform them. More importantly, the mind itself, with its peculiar tendencies and processes "independent of me" and yet "going on in me," subliminally orchestrates conscious intentions and deliberations from within. As Warrick Wadlington writes of the paradox of identity in Melville, the "motivating" tendencies in the psyche "are so far below ... conscious will that when we are somehow made aware of them, they seem to constitute an alien being."

In the dream state, the "alien" orchestrations of this *moi interieur*, so fundamental to the unfolding of character in Melville's fiction, are perhaps most nakedly perceptible. For the dreamer sometimes finds himself performing the most preposterous actions and, half-detached from them, looks upon them almost from outside. In such dreams, the mind's conversions of the involuntary into the voluntary are caught, so to speak, in an illuminating state of incompleteness. The half-willed remains half-estranged. But even the most passionately willed dramas of life itself, Melville suggests in his fiction, tend to develop out of roots as alien and obscure as those of dreaming. Man's suspicion that he may be something of a helpless dream-figure even at his most wide-awake proves more than merely rhetorical. Many of the unsettling tableaux in *The Confidence-Man* teach this very lesson. The Merchant, for example, begins to blurt out fervently that deep down he is mistrustful of the ways of Providence, however trusting of God and of humanity he has just appeared to be. And then he stops, "almost as ... surprised as his companion" at what has "escaped him." It has popped "out of him unbidden." He is startled at his "mad disclosure." And yet, in a fervent "rhapsody," he himself has made that disclosure.

What is spontaneously blurted out, then, is paradoxically disowned. The self-vigilant personality shrinks back queasily from such "unbidden" and unpremeditated behavior, shrinking back from itself. And it is fundamentally such a revolt of the self from unpremeditated, automatic tendencies in itself that is enacted in "Bartleby the Scrivener," albeit by detour and with a tinge of ambivalence, since the attorney beholds in his "copyist"—and draws nervously back from—a blind, instinctual core of being, irrationally fulfilling its own imperatives, that ultimately haunts and woos him in his own proper person. Freud initially defined "uncanniness" as the subliminal recognition of the intimate (but shunned) in the macabre, and what is subliminally intimate about macabre Bartleby is a certain unswerving deafness, dreamlike and beyond deflection, in his manner. His withdrawal from all normal activity may appear preposterous to common sense, but he seems eerily unalterable and mild in his preposterousness. That is to say, he never truly conveys the impression of being detached from, concerned for, and amazed at himself—and thus of being susceptible to rage or to derision. He lapses into an unblinking lack of self-wonder and self-concern such as the attorney might himself lapse into only in the automatism of deepest dream life. For in the aloneness of dream the need for the self's watchful direction of itself begins to fade, and what to waking consciousness might seem outrageous then becomes unblinkingly and mildly accepted over long stretches. Bartleby exhibits the equanimity of a dreamer amidst the outrageousness of his acts even in broad, bustling day. Precisely because the scrivener is so serene in his preposterousness, dreamily in the world but not of the world, the attorney, through all his pretenses and inhibitions, feels more "private" near this copyist than near anyone else. The world demands signs of self-vigilance—evidence that we are looking in on ourselves at least partly from *its*

perspective. It demands that we try to accommodate ourselves to its ways and, if we do not, that we at least offer, by way of anxious propitiation, lucid and ophherent explanations of our conduct. But the queer heart of man sometimes moves of its own accord—or prefers not to budge at all—in a way neither fathomed nor governed by the socialized, deliberative mind: "It seemed to me that ... he ... revolved every statement that I made; ... could not gainsay the ... conclusion; but, at the same time, some paramount consideration prevailed." In *Bartleby* the logical—even in broad daylight—overtly yields to the psychological. Forced into speech, the scrivener simply confirms this:

... I ... demanded the reason for such extraordinary conduct.

"Why do you refuse?"

"I would prefer not to."

"You *will* not?" the attorney later queries. But to "will," ostensibly, is to choose, whereas one tends simply to have one's preferences in all their absurdity and inevitability. "I *prefer* not," answers Bartleby. The lawyer comes closest to comprehending what he is up against not when he is trying to reason his way into it, but, rather, when he looks "a little into 'Edwards on the Will' and 'Priestly on Necessity'."

With plantlike grace, Bartleby folds mildly and joylessly into himself behind a "green folding screen." Even in motion he resembles some deaf, joyless plant, copying without "pause" by "sun-light and by candlelight," writing "silently, ... mechanically." But eventually he withdraws into an inert, total, behind-the-green-screen motionlessness, as if impelled by some tropism seeking ever simpler stages of being. Looking into his copyist's "dimly calm" eyes, the attorney finds nothing "ordinarily human" in them, but, rather, a mild presence beyond "uneasiness, anger, impatience, or impertinence," and he is both mesmerized and appalled.

Significantly, Freud mentions the uncanny fascination of deaf, aloof, and undeliberative human presence near the outset of his essay on "The 'Uncanny'." He quickly goes on to investigate other modes of the macabre, however, however, and his exploration of this particular motif is not especially thorough. Referring to Ernst Jenstch's earlier inquiry into the psychology of uncanny horror, and into the conditions which arouse it in works of art, Freud summarizes Jenstch's hypothesis that an uncanny feeling is sometimes evoked by the perception of deaf-and-dumb aloofness in the human. Or, conversely, such a feeling can be evoked by a suggestion of personality and awareness in the inanimate, as in the case of "wax-work figures" so artfully sculpted, dressed, and posed that they can almost be mistaken for living ones. "Epileptic seizures and the manifestations of insanity" can furthermore be added to this special category of the frightening, for "these" similarly "excite in the spectator the feeling" that "mechanical," deaf-and-dumb "processes are at work, concealed beneath the ordinary appearance of animation." In their equivocating dissonance, such images and forms of behavior tend to become uncanny. Freud emphasizes that he is summarizing Jenstch's hypothesis "without entirely accepting" it. But herein, I would suggest, is a promising *point d'appui* from which to explore the ambivalent figure of Bartleby.

Just how ambivalent a motif Melville is exploiting is suggested by Henri Bergson's hypothesis, in his complex study of laughter, that the discovery of the oblivious, unpremeditated, and deaf in a human figure is the foundation of the comic. "The laughable element" in a situation, Bergson writes, consists of "automatism" emerging just where "one would expect to find the wideawake ... pliability of a human being." The "suggestion must ... be" somewhat "subtle," he adds, for if "the element of automatism" is allowed to obliterate utterly the impression of animation and personality in a human figure, the comic dissonance of automatism *within* the human is lost. Since automatism intermingles coolly and mildly with human form in "*Bartleby*," one might well ask: in what way does Melville's tale differ from such comedy? How does Bartleby, alive and yet unreachable through glazed eyes and deadpan, shell-shocked looks, differ from, say, a Chaplinesque hero, similarly moving in an aloof, autistic daze through the perils and "roaring thoroughfares"

of modern times?

The question is difficult to answer partly because the comic and the grotesque are in practice so related that they often fade in and out of each other. Incongruous, sudden fluctuations of the laughable into the nightmarish certainly occur in works by Poe and Hawthorne, by Kafka and Nathanael West, and Melville's tale as well traffics ambivalently in both the humorous and the macabre. Bergsonian comedy, arising from a perception of automatism in the human, is flirted with in the very midst of uncanny effects. Sometimes, to be sure, the comedy seems simply comedy; a hint of blind automatism, creeping into the otherwise vigilant and alert personality, evokes untroubled laughter. Turkey and Nippers, for example, the one predictably "on" in the morning and "off in the afternoon, the other predictably the reverse, seem comically puppet-like and less than human as they relieve "each other, like guards," but they do not seem grotesque. Their clockwork behavior is manageable, follows a predictable routine, and does not threaten. Somewhat more macabre, however, is Turkey's obliviousness to the automatism of his speech in his conversation with the attorney:

"With submission, sir," said he, "yesterday I was thinking about Bartleby here, and I think that if he would prefer...."

"So you have got the word too," said I, slightly excited.

"With submission, what word, sir," asked Turkey...

"... prefer ...

"Oh, *prefer?* oh yes—queer word. I never use it myself.
But, sir, as I was saying, if he would but prefer—"

Such automatism, although comic, nevertheless begins to unsettle, for it hints of involuntary behavior following its own oblivious course in spite of the alert, self-vigilant personality—Turkey unaware of Turkey. Moreover, unlike the two clerks relieving each other like clockwork, this version of automatism cannot be incorporated into and made part and parcel of the smooth-running routine of the office. It stands out nakedly as intrusive and intractable behavior welling up deafly from within. Significantly, the attorney himself does not laugh in this episode. That a word may have "involuntarily rolled" from a human "tongue" makes him feel somewhat queasy. He has built his world on the premise that people act voluntarily and so can be appealed to and reasoned into productive forms of behavior. But the tale raises an unsettling question: how far can voluntary and self-conscious enactments of the self actually be taken for the self? To what extent is the voluntarily proffered personality—"... *prefer?* ...—a queer word. I never use it myself—trustworthy? As automatism blindly creeps into the speech of his clerk in spite of his clerk, the attorney discovers his illusion of control over another shattered. His ability to cajole through skillful exhortation and appeal, the very foundation of his profession, is undermined by a deafly impersonal, deafly intractable process even in a self who would consciously oblige.

Bartleby raises this same spectre of unreachable, deaf process usurping the personality, only in a much more intensified and radical form. The "eccentricities" of this cadaverous figure appear to be "involuntary"; his "disorder" seems "innate and incurable"; his "glazed" eyes seem blindly beyond appeal. Bergson has explored the way society, through derisive and embarrassing laughter, strives to "humiliate" an oblivious figure out modes of subhuman, absentminded behavior—a tendency to daydream in public, perhaps, or to speak in malapropisms and tautologies, or to fall asleep at the opera or at the ballet. But such laughter proves powerless over a remote incommunicado such as Bartleby, in whom a responsive, socially engageable ego is all but missing. Bergson writes of such laughter:

It begins ... with what might be called *a growing callousness to social life*. Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without... getting in touch with.. his fellow-beings. It is the part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream ... Society holds suspended over each individual.. a snubbing, which, although ... slight, is none the less dreaded.

But Bartleby, in "cadaverously gentlemanly nonchalance," seems aloofly closed in upon himself, hollow to the knock, and deaf to derisive laughter. It is true that the Chaplinesque or Buster Keaton automaton exhibits a somewhat similar deafness, as does the deadpan, Mark Twain innocent. But these figures belong to the staged, contrived, and dreamlike universe of farce, where the grotesque and the repugnant become half-converted into the wished. That is to say, from within a fantasy world immune to serious dangers, such dazed, autistic figures invite an audience to half-laugh at—but also to take a certain laughing pleasure in—a childlike obliviousness to the rules of logic, or to careening automobiles, normally forbidden to an alert, vigilant humanity. In such grotesque anesthetizations of the self—Buster Keaton wandering through exploding shells and craters without blinking—lurks a narcotic charm. Melville, inserting his figure of "cadaverously gentlemanly nonchalance" into the dense realism of "A Story of Wall-Street," focuses on the nightmarish aspect of the very same obliviousness which does not threaten, and even, in its radical innocence, appeals, in the Mark Twain naif and in the catatonic of silent, flickering movies. And even in Bartleby, as the attorney's enchantment-in-repugnance indicates, a tinge of uncanny appeal remains.

The uncanniness of Bartlebyian horror, then—the hint of something subliminally intimate and wished for in the grotesque—becomes more fully explicable once comic variations of the catatonic innocent are explored. The remote figure of Bartleby, however macabre, is a close cousin of the silent movie automation, and like him half-exercises the charm of the anesthetized self: "... his ... mildness ... not only disarmed me, but unmanned me"; "... and then—strange to say—I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of." Bartleby, in his snowy "nonchalance," breaks rules, stands silently in the middle of rooms while others "state," but remains "cadaverously" immune to derision and shame. The appeal of such a figure is acknowledged. But the horror of "glazed," torpid eyes is not exorcized out of this ambivalent version of an often purely comic motif. Innocence is nowhere more characteristically Melvillian—nowhere more seductive and terrifying both—than in "Bartleby." The scrivener's final withdrawal into a fetal oblivion, "knees drawn up," eyes "dim," in a womb-tomb of "surrounding walls," confirms that the dreamy charm of deadpan innocence is ultimately a call to mummified peace, enwombed or entombed.

The figure of the deadpan innocent, then, becomes a source both of horror and of pleasure as he moves in his pale, anesthetized way through an anxious and revved-up world. Precisely because he "automatically" follows his own course without bothering to get "in touch," he appeals even as he threatens. The deepest loyalty of the subconscious is with such a blind, instinctual figure, for whom blind instinct alone exists, as unaccommodating and "oblivious to everything" but its own "peculiar business" as an illogical twitching of the body or a recurring nightmare or dream.

Significantly, the deadpan innocent, dreamlike and aloof, does not truly reach out of himself and gesture. The alert movements of eye, lip, and limb through which humanity projects and perceives itself become strangely mechanized in such a figure, or sometimes are utterly missing, leaving a human shell: "I felt ... goaded on to encounter him in new opposition—to elicit some angry spark.... But ... I might as well have essayed to strike fire with my knuckles against a bit of Windsor soap." This same tar-baby routine between earnest gesticulator and autistic incommunicado, lost in an unruffled and undisturbed dream, can be comic on the vaudevillian stage. For in raw vaudevillian comedy events do not strive to be too credible and lifelike, and subconscious loyalties, accordingly, are freer to surface and to work themselves out. Melville's tale, acknowledging the conflicting validities of both social obligation and deepest instinctual wish, invites a more ambivalent response, but raw vaudevillian laughter illustrates the way the dice are loaded—at least in the most primitive and spontaneous recesses of being—against an anxious figure such as the attorney. On the revealing

vaudevillian stage (and it is through such comedy that the subliminally attractive underside of this macabre motif most nakedly surfaces), the figure of the earnest gesticulator—flattering, begging, worrying, falling all over himself in a pageantry of chagrin—obligingly metamorphoses into a fool before our eyes. The deaf-and-dumb dreamer, in his unruffled grace, obviously triumphs. And the laughter that erupts surely signals, at least in part, our own spontaneous pleasure in his cool and unruffled triumph. "My profoundest sense of being," Melville emphasizes to Hawthorne, is "irresponsibility," and the laughing repudiation of tense, worried figures is one avenue to such a state, which is no doubt why Hawthorne regarded laughter as "the most terrible modulation of the human voice"—when "out of place." Such laughter, however, is a returning or, more generally, a half-returning to the full innocence of instinctual being from an anxious and vigilant point of departure, and is not instinctual being in and of itself. It is hitherto tense, bottled-up energy becoming unfettered and unchained; its precondition is a tightly sealed lid. Significantly, the liberatingly comic aspect of naive, oblivious behavior, emphasizes Freud, exists only in "the apprehension" of "the person ... with inhibitions." And one might say the same of the terror and shame such behavior sometimes provokes. The naif himself is dreamily and facilely oblivious to the fuss he is raising. He causes laughter or horror but is himself deaf to it, like pure white light coloring everything else.

His overt deafness, Melville illustrates, is humanity's covert deafness, for a residue of purely naive and oblivious behavior survives in even the most vigilant and guarded personality, working its own deaf-and-dumb way through the most deliberate gestures and acts: "*Prefer?* ...—queer word. I never use it myself. But, sir, as I was saying, if he would but prefer...." It is from the perspective of situations such as this that sincerity and purity of motive should be judged in Melville's tale. The Janus-faced personality tends to be partially oblivious to itself in what it thinks are its most earnest and committed gestures. Herein, to a certain extent, lies the "universal lurking insincerity" in human thought and word mentioned in *Pierre*, and a charity cognizant of this principle, when turned on Melville's attorney, would be most charitable indeed. Often, to be sure, the attorney is merely self-serving and complacent. But even when he tries to be authentically kind to Bartleby and to others, the cards are metaphysically stacked, so to speak, against mere trying to be kind, and, indeed, against mere trying in general in the queer madhouse-universe envisaged by Melville:

"Mr. Nippers," said I, "I'd prefer that you withdraw for the present."

Somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word "prefer" upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions....

One might argue that from this same preferring force, "involuntarily" moving and shifting within, a pure and unfettered mercy for Bartleby, hazarding all it has, might spontaneously surface of its own accord if the attorney would but let it. For true mercy, lived by the spirit and not by the letter, is not strained and flows generously outward. But, as Melville writes to Hawthorne, his closest and most intimate friend: "In me divine magnanimities are spontaneous and instantaneous—catch them while you can. The world goes round, and the other side comes up. So now I can't write what I felt." Moreover, "deepest ... being"—what Pip tastes of when he becomes a castaway in the Pacific—is "uncompromised, indifferent as ... God," and sees all gesture, caring, and chagrin in the third person. However intimate Pip may eventually become with Ahab, "Pip's missing," says Pip of Pip in the purest stage of his "insanity [...]... heaven's sense." The world, then, "goes round"; feeling divorced from willed, artificial consistency is capricious and unstable; love wanes and other feelings wax; and the primitive core of being, moreover, is as faceless and instinctual as the figure of Bartleby, and if Bartleby is to be forgiven in his purity and innocent "nonchalance," the attorney, surely, should be all the more forgiven, and all the more pitied, in his guilt, complexity, and ambivalent trying.

Insincerity-in-sincerity in Melville's tale, of course, is finally a matter of mediating inadequacies never to be fully transcended. Probing the cognitive foundations of empathy—the fragile paradigms through which human figures strive to reach out of their walled-in amorphousness and solitude—Melville lays bare an inevitable disjuncture between gesture and inmost being. The living human image tends to exist through and

according to gesticulations, facial expressions, and roles. But these fluctuate markedly from culture to culture, from age to age, and the "copyist" who fails to "copy" gestures of eye, lip, and limb illustrates an unsettling epistemological principle: translucent, empathically "open" forms of humanness, normally mimicked and gestured back and forth between figure and figure, are nevertheless configurations and images of human-ness ultimately severable from the self-in-itself. In an analysis of "dehumanization" in cubism and other modernist art forms, Ortega y Gasset explores the distillation of seemingly living and physiognomic shapes into "pure patterns" of cognition. And Melville as well, no doubt influenced by traumatic experiences of culture shock in the South Seas, severs the shifting iconography of the human form from fundamental being. The "beauty" in a Typee's tattooed face, for example, perceptible and attractive to the Typee, proves as uninterpretable to Tom's Western eyes as ancient, undecoded scripture. Forms of beauty, enticement, and gesture, like forms of writing, are translucent or opaque depending upon perspective, and Bartleby the non-copying copyist mimics none of these, receding into an impoverished timelessness beyond the shifting iconographies of social presence. Again and again he is pictured standing mutely amid ruins, silent and Adamic. Only through time-bound, historically compromising mimicries can the spirit in some oblique sense reach out of itself.

The mimicry of abstract icons of personality, of course, can be overdone as well as underdone. "Attorney" blithely informs "grub-man" that he has never been "socially acquainted with any forgers," but the tale itself is a study in overly forged and mimicked social presence, from Turkey's oratorical "With submission, sir," to the grubman's clumsy simulations of "genteel" breeding—"Then, laying his hand piteously on my shoulder, [he] sighed"—to the attorney's initial introduction of himself: "Imprimis: I am ... one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but, in the cool tranquility or a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds." Through such paradigms, as stylized as the attitudes, gestures, and stances on an ancient urn, Melville's characters struggle into variations of a presiding social iconography. It is mutual theater. And to a degree it is necessary. But it is so overdone in Melville's "Story of Wall-Street"—so engaged in without irony towards the speciousness of mere form as form—that the very paradigms in and around and through which the self might obliquely squirm into view become over-earnest, and, hence, become opaque.

Social paradigms become opaque; subjective being is hazed over; but its influence remains profound. And this continuing, if unaccountable, influence of the socially hazed over is largely what gives Melville's tale its Kafkaesque ring. Beyond—and in spite of—the rigidities of social presence, "I strangely felt something superstitious knocking at my heart," acknowledges the attorney. Or "a certain squeamishness, of I know not what, withheld me." Again and again one is left hovering between seizable, simplifying metaphors of selfhood and a lacuna in the perception of self—"something from within"—which in its very vagueness draws attention. Mysterious, the essence of being in its depths, it is, moreover, involuntary—"I strangely felt something ... forbidding me to carry out my purpose"—and personality in the tale, albeit in acts of referential inadequacy, strives to sustain public guises of voluntary, approachable, and deliberative behavior. In attempted transcendence of blind and faceless forces within itself, and often in overt, willful hypocrisies gratefully accepted *because* struggling against the suspected tug of the inwardly preferred, the personality reaches out of itself in acts of social theater: "'Your sarvant, sir, your sarvant,' said the grub-man, making a low saluation with his apron." The grub-man, serving up both grub and a public face, performs, though rather grubbily, what is fundamental to social survival, and what Bartleby fails to perform. Somewhere between the overly willed behavior of a grub-man, however, and the absurd and fatal grace of a Bartleby, preposterous and yet as inevitable as a dream, a work of art tends to reach its own ambivalent equilibrium, and images and words become candid in that very ambivalence. The attorney is a loquacious and smooth talker. But he talks best when he talks just beyond himself. When "sad fancyings—chimeras, doubtless, of a sick and silly brain," involuntarily lead him "on to other and more special thoughts," when he begins to "stagger" in his "plainest faith" and confesses to being "browbeaten," when he admits to perplexity and ambivalence—"And then—strange to say—I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of"—he emerges at his most trustworthy and intimate, and the walls between him and us seem less thick, if more obscure.

Criticism: Robert N. Mollinger (essay date 1981)

SOURCE: "The Literary Work: Herman Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street'," in *Psychoanalysis and Literature: An Introduction*, Nelson-Hall, 1981, pp. 85-96.

[Mollinger is an English scholar with extensive training in psychoanalysis. In the following excerpt, Mollinger considers "Bartleby" to be a portrayal of basic human, psychological needs, focusing especially on Melville's portrayal of oral fixations.]

In Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" Bartleby's lack of motivation to work, his employer's motivation for putting up with him, the imagery, and even the actual subject of the story have yet to be fully clarified. The characters have been seen either as doubles of each other or as opposites, while the theme has been looked at from a social perspective or related to the biography of the author. A study of the story's imagery clarifies both the personalities of the characters and the theme. The characters' personal and interpersonal dynamics show us the subject of the story which is a unified literary work displaying a complex intertwining of theme, character, and imagery.

To eat or not to eat is the question which reverberates throughout the story and in the minds of the characters. "Bartleby the Scrivener" is a feast of food in which all the characters partake. Smelling of eating-houses and spending his money on drink, the lawyer's old helper, Turkey, is described by metaphors of food: as a horse feels his oats, Turkey feels the coat that the lawyer had given him, and it makes him rash and restive. The younger helper, Nippers, is equally self-indulgent with food. Always suffering from indigestion, he nevertheless continues to feed himself gingernuts, cakes, and apples. He does not need to drink, as Turkey does, because "nature herself seemed to have been his vintner, and at his birth charged him so thoroughly with an irritable, brandy-like disposition, that all subsequent potations were needless." Ginger Nut, the twelve-year-old boy, not only brings back food for the others but supplies himself with various sorts of nuts. It is clear that all three helpers are involved with food, so much so that they *are* food, as their names tell us: Turkey, Nippers (as in, to take a nip), and Ginger Nut.

Just as their mouths are their most important bodily part, "my two scriveners were fain to moisten their mouths very often with Spitzenbergs," the narrator-lawyer, their employer, is a man of the mouth. Instead of food, he digests words:

I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion.

Though not with Spitzenbergs, he too moistens his mouth, nor does he hesitate to interrupt his work for his dinner hour.

Whereas Turkey, Nippers, Ginger Nut, and the lawyer are all well fed, some to the point of indigestion, Bartleby is not. The lawyer notices that Bartleby never goes to dinner and, in fact, barely eats or drinks.

On the artistry of "Bartleby":

In "Bartleby the Scrivener" Melville achieves complexity through simplicity and economy. He has completely reversed the method of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, in which, particularly in the latter, he sought to achieve complexity through elaboration and expansion of rhetoric. The simplicity and economy of language in "Bartleby the Scrivener" that manages to suggest a complexity of meaning looks forward to James's accomplishments in such short *nouvelles* as *The Beast in the Jungle* and *The Bench of Desolation*. More significantly, in Melville's case, this simplicity is reminiscent of Hawthorne at his best. The idiom in particular

and the style in general are wholly Melville's own, but he could have learned from Hawthorne artistic control over language in which images and symbols are used suggestively to extend the meanings already inherent in a narrative situation.

Charles G. Hoffman, in *"The Shorter Fiction of Herman Melville,"* *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. LII, No. 3, July 1953, pp. 414-430.

I was quite sure he never visited any refectory or eating-house; while his pale face clearly indicated that he never drank beer like Turkey, or tea and coffee even, like other men....

In the end he dies from starvation, even though the suitably named prison grubman, Mr. Cutlets, attempts futilely to feed him.

The continual emphasis on food and eating indicates that this story is not just about life on Wall Street but is also about something much more basic. So, too, do the names of the characters: Turkey, Nippers, Ginger Nut, Mr. Cutlets, and even Bartleby, which [Henry A.] Murray [in his "Bartleby and I"] suggests refers to "bottle baby." In fact, food submerges, and merges with the work being done in the law office. Turkey seals a mortgage with a ginger cake, and Ginger Nut's perspective on his job is similarly confused with food, especially his collection of nuts. "Indeed, to this quick-witted youth the whole noble science of the law was contained in a nut-shell." The work routine of the law office was organized around the assistants' eating habits. Nippers, suffering from indigestion, does not do much work in the morning, but he recovers enough by the afternoon to do some labor. Turkey works well in the morning but, after dining and drinking at noon, accomplishes no work later. For Bartleby too, working and eating are confused. Upon being hired, he immediately and enthusiastically dives into copying.

At first Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famished for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion.

Hungry for work, he almost uncontrollably stuffs it in.

Life, then, on Wall Street becomes eating on Wall Street, and the story no longer seems to be just sociological but also psychological. The characters in the story are hungry; this fact gives meaning to their relationships which draw on a psychological, developmental stage of early childhood.

At this early childhood level, as [Erik H.] Erikson [in his *Childhood and Society*] puts it, one lives through and loves (as well as hates) with his mouth. In terms of the child's relationship with another person, the child experiences the other person as a fulfiller of needs like his mother. The mother has no separate life of her own and exists only to feed him.

If one accepts that the characters in "Bartleby the Scrivener" evidence a peculiar amount of interest in food, it should not be surprising to find that what interests them most is the satisfaction of their needs. Turkey, indisposed after eating his dinner, not only does not work well for his employer in the afternoon but actually ruins much of what he does work on. Asked to take the afternoons off by the lawyer, he refuses and insists on staying, regardless of his employer's wishes. Nippers only puts in a half day's good work for a full day's pay and even usurps some of the lawyer's professional affairs.

Both of them are symbiotically "living off" the lawyer; he feeds them full pay, while they give back much less—and, in fact, "giving and taking" is the essence of all relationships in the story. The lawyer gives Turkey an old coat, while Turkey defends the status of their relationship by nothing that he has supplied his employer some stationery. "With submission, sir, it was generous of me to find you in stationery on my own account."

Described as a "piratical looking young man," his fellow worker Nippers is one who appears to take if not to steal. Ginger Nut functions as a fulfiller of needs, especially in "his duty as cake and apple purveyor for Turkey and Nippers."

Since his approach to life is basically the same, the lawyer wants his needs gratified in the easiest way. This attitude affects his life, as well as his job. "I am a man who, from his youth upward, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best." Being unambitious, the lawyer is only looking for work enough to feed him and make it easier for him to live. Counting on his appointment as a Master in Chancery to provide him eternal funds, he wanted to literally live off the appointment. "I had counted upon a life-lease of the profits." He views other people only in terms of what they can do for him and sees both Nippers and Turkey as "useful" to him. Upon first seeing Bartleby, he calls him a "valuable acquisition."

Although the lawyer does take from others, as they do from him, he functions mainly to feed others. He gives Turkey the coat; he continually hands money to Bartleby. His relationship to Bartleby becomes almost parental. The lawyer supports him monetarily, gives him a place to live, tries to protect him from others, feeds him through the grub-man, and even offers to take him home. The lawyer, half-seriously, begins to believe that his only role in life is to fulfill Bartleby's needs.

Gradually I slid into the persuasion that these troubles of mine, touching the scrivener, had been all predestined from eternity, and Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence ... Others may have loftier parts to enact; but my mission in this world, Bartleby, is to furnish you with office room for such period as you may see fit to remain.

The lawyer is here, functioning as the good mother who supplies what is needed, exactly the kind of relationship that Bartleby wants.

Pallid, sedate, forlorn, and melancholy, Bartleby is depressed, depressed from lack of food. First attacking his new job because he is famished, he then attempts to manipulate people to meet his needs. Ginger Nut brings him cakes, but that is not enough. Soon the lawyer is expected to provide him with room and board. Bartleby wants to be allowed to stay in the law office, or rather live in the law office, without doing any work. After all, a baby is not expected to work in order to be fed by his mother. Bartleby prefers to be taken care of, prefers to not work for love, prefers to have a loving parent catering to his needs. Realizing this, the lawyer notes that "he prefers to cling...."

Unfortunately, having been starved for so long, Bartleby can no longer be nourished by what he eats. Gorging himself on his work does not sustain him. In the end, giving up copying, he stops working altogether. Soon real food nourishes him as little as symbolic food. Never dining, "I am unused to dinners," Bartleby "eats nothing but ginger nuts," but even these are worthless. "Ginger, then, had no effect upon Bartleby." For Bartleby, it really made no sense to take money from the lawyer, food from the grub-man, Mr. Cutlets, or to go home with the lawyer. Wanting to be fed, Bartleby is in hopeless despair of ever receiving anything nourishing. Seeking the good mother, he finds only the bad, a predicament symbolized by his previous job in the Dead Letter office:

Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness: can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? For by the cartload they are annually burned. Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring: the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a banknote sent in swiftest charity:—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing....

Despair for food leads to a hopeless "dead" man.

As well as being depressed, Bartleby is also angry, angry at being deprived. In part, his anger comes out in an oral way in his giving everyone the "silent treatment." "I remembered that he never spoke but to answer." It shows, too, in his negativity; when he does answer, it is always with a "no" or a "I'd prefer not to." Continually repeating this statement, Bartleby is appropriately referred to as "mulish" and stubborn by the others. They also see him as full of disdain and haughtiness. Though Bartleby does not realize how provocative he is, the others are indeed provoked. Turkey, for example, wants to fight him physically. It is the lawyer who is most affected by feeling the impact of Bartleby's maneuvers. "Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance." Feeling "twinges of an impotent rebellion" and "disarmed," the lawyer is castrated by Bartleby, "For I consider that one, for the time, is in a way unmanned when he tranquilly permits his hired clerk to dictate to him, and order him away from his own premises."

Bartleby's aggression is not only a way to coerce the gratification he longs for, it is also a reaction to the deprivation of that gratification. Thinking of Bartleby's melancholy, the lawyer realizes that "the scrivener's pale form appeared to me laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding sheet," and he wants to protect him, shield him from "rude persecution." Uncared for, Bartleby is dead, first symbolically and then actually; yet, Bartleby is also suicidal. Hating the depriving other, he kills himself to make the other person suffer. The lawyer, who is continually upset about him, is provoked to do more and more for him even in the face of rejection. Finally taken to the tombs, Bartleby blames the lawyer and angrily distrusts him. Since trust in the world develops from trust in the mother to feed one, and since this is a trust which Bartleby does not have, he turns on the lawyer. "'I know you,' he said, without looking round,—'and I want nothing to say to you.'" Bartleby, betrayed by being uncared for, angrily and suicidally rejects all help and starves himself to death.

The other characters experience that anger which is intimately connected to the need-fulfilling relationships they have established. This anger comes from needing someone, from being frustrated, or from having to appease the other person to receive from him. "Disposed, upon provocation, to be slightly rash with his tongue," Turkey, from the lawyer's perspective, feeds himself, or has been fed, too much. Rash with his tongue after his meal, he becomes even more insolent on receiving a gift, a coat from the lawyer:

One winter day I presented Turkey with a highly-respectable looking coat.... I thought Turkey would appreciate the favour, and abate his rashness and obstreperousness of afternoons. But no. I verily believe that buttoning himself up in so downy and blanket-like a coat had a pernicious effect upon him; upon the same principle that too much oats are bad for horses. In fact, precisely as a rash, restive horse is said to feel his oats, so Turkey felt his coat. It made him insolent. He was a man whom prosperity harmed.

Thinking that feeding Turkey will mellow him, the lawyer discovers the opposite: like an overfed horse, Turkey becomes irritable. For Turkey, it seems that too much food is an intrusion to be fought off; he is "pugilistic" and images himself a military leader attacking the documents he works on.

Nippers' aggression also comes out of his mouth and is apparently caused by indigestion:

The indigestion seemed betokened in an occasional nervous testiness and grinning irritability, causing the teeth to audibly grind together over mistakes committed in copying; unnecessary maledictions, hissed, rather than spoken, in the heat of business....

Whereas Turkey becomes combative after drinking, Nippers, with his brandy-like disposition, well fed by the vintner Nature at birth, does not need any further drink to be irritable and curse.

Whereas both Turkey and Nippers become orally aggressive after having been well fed, the lawyer's aggression is related to food in a different way. Telling us that he seldom loses his temper and that he is a "man of peace," he prides himself on the fact that he engages in "no vulgar bullying, no bravado of any sort, no choleric hectoring...." However, he does become resentful and angry when his needs are not being met. He becomes rash when he discovers that he will not have a life-long income for the Chancery to live off. He wants to expel Turkey because he does not work well in the afternoon. When Bartleby stops contributing to the office, the lawyer becomes more and more resentful and desires to eliminate him. His rage seems to operate on the principle "if you will not give to me, I will remove you." He wants to "thrust [Bartleby] ignominiously from my presence" and "violently ... from the premises." Trying always to control this anger, he forgets the matter or, having fantasies of murder, he strives "to drown my exasperated feelings toward the scrivener by benevolently construing his conduct."

Again, this is a particularly oral rage, a rage at not being fed, at not having needs met, which comes out in the lawyer's continual ironic tone and in his fantasies of cursing at Bartleby. More importantly, it is the way the lawyer holds in his aggression: he feeds himself. After being disobeyed again, the lawyer begins to become angry.

"Very good, Bartleby," said I, in a quiet sort of serenely severe self-possessed tone, intimating the unalterable purpose of some terrible retribution very close at hand. At the moment I half intended something of the kind. But upon the whole, as it was drawing towards my dinner-hour, I thought it best to put on my hat and walk home for the day....

His dinner puts a stop to acting out his aggressive feelings. Here we see how the ingestion of food works in an opposite direction than it does with Turkey and Nippers. They become more distempered after eating and drinking. The lawyer's aggression is similar to Bartleby's; both become angry over deprivation. The lawyer, however, knows how to feed himself, while Bartleby starves himself even more. He joins the depriver by depriving himself.

In such symbiotic need-fulfilling relationships, there are usually attempts at separation. For, even though one has his needs satisfied, when one is merged with another person, one loses self-identity, or the sense of self. To have a complete self, one must function independently. Turkey and Nippers, both well fed, if not overfed, spend half the day having their desires gratified and fulfilling the employer's needs. The other half a day, they are themselves—aggressive (Turkey) and ambitious (Nippers). They have partially separated from a symbiotic relationship in the direction of their individual development. Bartleby, because his need is so great, cannot separate at all. While his extreme hunger leads him to gorge himself, his extreme distrust prevents him from finding nourishment. He is caught in the dilemma of forever seeking and never finding, he wants help but cannot accept it. To be on his own is dangerous, since his is a world of uncaring strangers and rude persecution: "I thought I saw peering out upon him the eyes of murderers and thieves."

The lawyer's dilemma is different. Wanting to be rid of Bartleby, that is, to be on his own, he also wants to be with Bartleby, that is, symbiotically together. He fantasizes throwing the scrivener out; he moves his office away from him; he deserts him at the end. The lawyer has difficulty in even having fantasies about leaving Bartleby; he must constantly fight himself to create them. Thinking of confronting Bartleby, he feels that he is indulging an "evil impulse." Becoming resentful, he recalls the divine injunction "that ye love one another." For the lawyer, hate and separation are evil and forbidden.

The lawyer's negative view of separation, seeing it as an immoral abandonment of another human being, partially explains his difficulty in kicking the nonworking scrivener out. In addition, the lawyer benefits from his bond with Bartleby, for, as he says, Bartleby is useful and valuable to him. Though Bartleby is a "millstone," an affliction, a haunting apparition which produces melancholy in the lawyer, it is a "fraternal melancholy" caused in both of them by a deprivation of needs. It is the lawyer's own need which causes him

to allow Bartleby to cling to him. In mothering, feeding, and caring for the scrivener, the lawyer is mothering himself. For all his rationalizations, he identifies with Bartleby and feeds him as he himself wishes to be fed:

He is useful to me. 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. Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humour him in his strange wilfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience.

The image of food, that delicious, sweet morsel, is revealing: in feeding the other person, he feeds himself. The lawyer is almost as involved in the symbiotic need-fulfilling relationship as Bartleby is. This is why he has such difficulty in breaking it up, a difficulty foreshadowed by his futile attempt to make Turkey take the afternoons off. Unfortunately, by fooling himself into thinking that the cost of these attachments is small, the lawyer sacrifices his identity. He becomes the victim of his surroundings. His colleagues laugh at him and gossip about him; he is driven from his office, and his employees rebel.

Since most of the characters are ambivalent over their needs, their other attributes are defenses against these symbiotic relationships. Describing himself as a safe, prudent man who keeps away from people, the lawyer never addresses a jury, never seeks public applause. Rather, he hides himself away among legal documents, "in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds." Emotionally aloof, he chats about sentimental stories and admits that his first experience of melancholy, in sixty years of life, was caused by Bartleby. His organizational thoroughness and his capacity to distance himself and objectify himself results in him thinking of himself as a legal document. "*Imprimis*: I am a man who...." This aloofness and distancing are meant to avoid invasions of himself. Speaking of the turbulence of the law profession, he states "yet nothing of that sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace." Yet, when Bartleby arrives his peace is invaded, first by Bartleby's symbiotic clinging and angry rebellion and then by the lawyer's own needs to mother and cling. Bartleby has such a strong effect on the lawyer because he has forced him after sixty years to experience needs and frustrations the lawyer has avoided throughout his whole life. When in his closing statement the lawyer speaks of starvation and despair and sighs "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" he actually means "poor Bartleby and poor me.

Bartleby is even more aloof. Seeking solitude, Bartleby is constantly in his "hermitage," his work area. By neither eating, talking, working, looking at the lawyer, nor giving, he refuses to relate to others. Declining to join the group of Turkey, Nippers, Ginger Nut, and the lawyer, he symbolically makes clear his refusal to join humanity. The lawyer concludes that there is nothing "ordinarily human about him ...". Almost autistic, Bartleby's withdrawal from others is more severe than the lawyer's. he stares at the wall and day-dreams in his hermitage. Later, in the Tombs, he faces the "dead-wall" until he dies in a fetal position, the ultimate snug retreat. Like the lawyer, he, too, is attempting to prevent the invasion of his self by others, with all the emotional involvement that entails. He stands as "a perpetual sentry in the corner" forever, "without moving from his privacy." His first refusal to work is to fend off a demand which intrudes upon this privacy, but Bartleby's withdrawal is also a denial of his own needs. Not unexpectedly, this results in his death.

In summary, we have moved from an examination of the predominant oral imagery in the story to an understanding of the interpersonal dynamics of the characters. We are presented with a continuum of characters all involved in symbiotic, need-gratifying relationships. These relationships are founded on basic wishes, as Bartleby's favorite word "prefer" indicates. At one end of the continuum are Turkey and Nippers, who have been well nurtured, perhaps too well nurtured, and for whom more food means engulfment by the world. For at least half the day, they attempt to move on and develop their own selves, Turkey by being aggressive and Nippers by being ambitious. At the other end of the continuum are the lawyer and Bartleby. Still longing for nurturance, the life-lease of easy gratification, the lawyer attempts to deny this desire by staying aloof from others and by controlling his emotions. When he does become involved, he denies his need

by fulfilling it vicariously—he mothers instead of being mothered. Whereas the lawyer has at least partially found the easy way of life, Bartleby has never found it. Apparently never having been fed, he is famished. Since he cannot trust what is given to him, he autistically withdraws and creates his own world. In this ultimate despair, and angry because of betrayal by others, he gives up and kills himself.

Given the similarities in their characters, it is no wonder that critics vacillate between considering the lawyer or Bartleby more important. As some have pointed out, they are "doubles" of each other, and so indeed in their need, their anger, and their "fraternal melancholy," they are. In symbiotic relationships, there is no clear distinction between the self and the other person. There is rather a fusion of the internal images of the self and the other person. Only when one has become one's self is there differentiation. The story certainly is not just about Wall Street. It is about basic needs, the symbiotic ways these needs are fulfilled, and the anger, distrust, and despair which results when they are not met. It concerns dependence on others for gratification, the loss of the self in such dependent relationships, the quest for the self in independence, and the defenses used to avoid acknowledging these complex feelings.

Criticism: Dennis R. Perry (essay date 1987)

SOURCE: "'Ah, Humanity': Compulsion Neuroses in Melville's 'Bartleby,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Fall, 1987, pp. 407-15.

[In the following essay, Perry contends that the character of Bartleby is not schizophrenic, but neurotic.]

Psychoanalytic critics of Melville's "Bartleby" have been remarkably consistent in their diagnoses of the enigmatic scrivener as schizophrenic. Along with the tale's nearsighted narrator, they have isolated Bartleby as a fascinating case study while overlooking the importance of his relationship to the other characters in the tale. The problem with such readings is that, in isolating Bartleby as a psychological aberration, these critics have missed Melville's broader concerns. As we begin on the assumption that Melville constructs a coherent tale in which each character must be understood in the context of the others, it becomes possible to see their common compulsion neuroses. This more inclusive perspective reveals that the tale's structure is based on a continuum of the ego defenses each character erects against its compulsions and obsessions. It is the helplessness of all of Melville's characters and their common confinement, in what Newton Arvin called a "cosmic madhouse," that turn the activities of a Wall-Street law office into a shattering vision of modern times.

Though terms associated with Freud's definition of the mind have been criticized for reducing the complexities of literature, I use them here because they provide both a useful means to distinguish character psychology and a common vocabulary by which to respond to earlier studies. However, I use these terms without assuming their practical psychoanalytic value. As Harold Bloom notes, "Freud's universal and comprehensive theory of the mind probably will outlive the psychoanalytical therapy.... While previous psychoanalytic critics have proceeded as if Bartleby were really insane—as if Melville were trying to realistically portray an interesting psychotic—I find Freud's terms most helpful as a means to define subtleties of character behavior. The characters in "Bartleby," like those in "Ligeia," are not important as real people so much as emblematic of ideas associated with the plight of all people.

Because I rely heavily on Freud's definition of how the mind functions, a quick review of specifics is, perhaps, in order. In Freud's definition of the mind, the ego functions to mediate between the natural impulses of the id and external reality. Thus, in its attempts to physically and psychologically preserve the self, the ego pursues pleasure by adapting to, running from, or modifying the external world. Problems arise when the id attempts to force its way through the protective barriers erected by the ego. Otto Fenichel explains [in his *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*] what happens when the id succeeds:

In all psychoneuroses the control of the ego has become relatively insufficient. In conversion symptoms, the ego is simply overthrown; actions occur that are not intended by the ego. In compulsions and obsessions, the fact that the ego governs motility is not changed, but the ego does not feel free in using this governing power.

In "Bartleby" all of the major characters vainly attempt to use ego defense mechanisms to reduce the anxiety produced by the sterile activity of the law office. These mechanisms, discernible along a continuum, are most clearly manifested in the characters' compulsive behavior, the tale documenting the way they ultimately fail to wall out the natural impulses of the id with the artificial social conventions erected by the ego.

The lawyer, whose id seems nearly totally suppressed when we first meet him, represents the extreme right along the ego continuum of responses to Wall-Street's values. His ego's total endorsement of the "safe" and "prudent" life of the material status quo, however, thinly disguises primitive impulses of his id. These impulses are manifested as compulsion neuroses, reaction formations of his ego designed to reroute his anti-social tendencies. Revealing themselves as obsessions with orderliness and money, his primitive impulses suggest that he is, as Freud suggests, one whose "instinctual life is anally oriented." His orderliness—abundantly evident in his careful structuring of his tale, the sectioning of his offices, his attempts to control his emotions, and his profession as a lawyer—points to his "obedience to ... environmental requirements covering the regulation of excretory functions." Reflecting his frugality, even the sound of money gives the lawyer pleasure as he expresses his enjoyment of John Jacob Astor's name because its "rounded and orbicular sound ... rings like unto bullion." In addition, he finds "snug" comfort in handling "rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title-deeds." His obsessions with money and orderliness, then, are his ego's means of socializing and sublimating the primitive impulses of his id.

The obsession defenses of the lawyer's ego are visually reinforced by the ground-glass doors that protect him from the disorderly and threatening world of his scribes, also reflecting his limited self-perception. In order to enjoy the social benefits of his status on Wall Street, he adopts its social class system and isolates himself from his scribes in two ways. First, he walls them off physically with doors, and in Bartleby's case, with a screen. Second, he denies their behavior's legitimate motivation by characterizing them in comic terms. Because their unconventional and enigmatic patterns of behavior are reminders of the irrational desires of his own id, he attributes them to the convenient external causes of intemperance and indigestion. Moreover, he feels threatened by his inability to deal effectively with the copyists, undermining his Astorian self-image as an efficient and "prudent" business man. His lame attempt to reduce Turkey to part-time duties at one point presents him with further unwanted revelations of irresolution. In order to deny, or at least suppress, the outrageous "fits" of his employees and his own willingness to sanction their financially unproductive behavior, the lawyer resorts to rationalization: "It was fortunate for me that ... their fits relieved each other, like guards. When Nippers' was on, Turkey's was off; and *vice versa*. This was a good natural arrangement, under the circumstances."

The central action of the tale is, of course, the lawyer's confrontation with the inscrutable Bartleby. Bartleby, even more than the other copyists, forces the lawyer to face the fragility of his ego's defenses. The confrontation between the two seems a dramatization of what Anna Freud calls the system of attacks, counter-attacks, and defenses between the id and the ego. The lawyer's inept responses to Bartleby's irrational behavior is his ego's denial of the Bartleby enigma. The lawyer, in fact, repeatedly delays any response at all to the scrivener's inexplicable behavior. When Bartleby "prefers not" to check his own copy, for example, the lawyer assumes that "my ears had deceived me." Later, upon Bartleby's refusal to copy, the lawyer denies the refusal by believing that the scrivener "might have temporarily impaired his vision." The lawyer's illusory world of ego screens and ground-glass metaphysics continues to break down as Bartleby's unconventional behavior causes the lawyer to doubt his own most basic assumptions: "When a man is brow beaten in some unprecedented and violently unreasonable way, he begins to stagger in his own plainest faith."

The real weakness of the lawyer's ego defenses are apparent in his vascillating emotional responses to Bartleby. On one occasion, after telling Bartleby that he feels "friendly" towards him, he confesses to the reader that he became "nettled" by Bartleby's refusal to cooperate. Soon, finding himself in a state of "nervous resentment" following Bartleby's refusal to do anything, the lawyer has to check himself "from further demonstrations." His subsequent revery on murder suggests the frenzied state of his feelings, which he checks with a burst of charity: "Men have committed murder for jealousy's sake, and anger's sake, and hatred's sake, and selfishness' sake, and spiritual pride's sake; but no man, that ever I heard of, ever committed a diabolical murder for sweet charity's sake." Such struggles between his id-inspired hatred of Bartleby and his ego-inspired reaction formation of pity and patience reappear as the lawyer leaves Bartleby alone in the deserted offices: "strange to say—I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of."

After these confrontations with Bartleby in which he uses the doctrine of assumptions (ego) to circumvent the preferences (id) of the scrivener, the lawyer is again forced, upon the entreaties of his old offices' new inmates, to confront Bartleby and his own fears. Following the scrivener's wall of incomprehensible rejections to new career suggestions, the lawyer lapses into complete incoherency and despair. The confounded lawyer's rationality—one of the ego's methods for self-preservation—finally snaps: "If you do not go away from these premises before night, I shall feel bound—indeed, I am bound—to—to—to quit the premises myself." With no verbal recourse available to modify his environment, his rhetorical strategies as bankrupt as Bartleby's, the lawyer must flee external reality. Faced with his own rational fall and the cumulative realization of the futility of his irrationalizations as well as his other rhetorical strategies to maintain a consistent Wall-Street image, he flees to Broadway to find temporary asylum. Significantly, his desire to be "carefree and quiescent" is his recognition of the futility of rational thought to solve his dilemma with Bartleby. He must, therefore, find his peace on Broadway, where imagination and emotion rather than the rationality of Wall Street rule. Thus his ego has temporarily broken down and seeks the state of the "ideal ego," wherein the id and ego are in harmony [Leland E. Hinsie and Robert Jean Campbell, *Psychiatric Dictionary*]. One characteristic of the "ideal ego" is the fantasy of returning to the womb, a regression that seems apparent in the lawyer's huddling in a rockaway.

In contrast to the lawyer who, until his climactic confrontation with Bartleby, uses language effectively to deny the impulses of the id, Turkey and Nippers are between the extremes of the lawyer and Bartleby on the Wall-Street continuum. Each of the scriveners is only able to deny his id's impulses half of each day. While both recognize the need to accept Wall-Street values for professional preservation, neither is able to do so fully. Freud called this condition a split in the ego, in which "an unpleasant knowledge is kept isolated from the rest of the personality." Freud describes the neurotic "split in the ego" as if he had Turkey and Nippers in mind:

It is indeed a universal characteristic of the neuroses that there are present in the subject's mental life, as regards some particular behavior, two different attitudes, contrary to each other and independent of each other; in that case, however, one of them belongs to the ego and the opposing one, which is repressed, belongs to the id. [*An Outline of Psychoanalysis*]

In the case of both scriveners, the tedium and socially demeaning nature of law copying, being incompatible with their ambitions, must be partially denied by the ego. Consequently, both utilize fantasy as a means of denial, and their equal inability to maintain such fantasies more than half a day coincides with the difficulty of perpetuating that defense mechanism. Anna Freud suggests that in adults

there is a greater degree of reality testing and intolerance of opposites. Fantasy is not so highly prized, but if there is considerable investment in fantasy, it can become incompatible with reality. [Anna Freud, summarized in Joseph Sandier's *The Analysis of Defense*]

Their unconventional "fits" are a release from Wall Street's repressive atmosphere, becoming vehicles for self-expression beyond copying others' words. Law copying itself reflects the processes of the ego copying and maintaining the conventions of an external source. To maintain the fiction of worth in the Wall-Street world, each creates a rhetorical strategy during his fit that enables him to deny his status as a mere copyist. Part of the humor of the tale, in fact, is in the grotesque forms their denials take, not quite elevating them to their desired status levels.

Turkey's id successfully attacks his ego's defenses each noon as he drinks his lunch at the local saloon. While he is an efficient and quiet copyist during the morning, adapting himself to the demands of his external environment, he displays his fundamental hatred of his position in the afternoon. In his subsequent drunkenness, he rhetorically substitutes the persona of cavalier gentleman for that of mere copyist. In this way his childish id creates a fantasy persona that, together with the alcohol, overwhelms the restraints of his ego. He displays this side of his personality as he explains to the lawyer his attitude towards copying in the afternoons: "In the morning I but marshal and deploy my columns; but in the afternoon I put myself at their head, and gallantly charge the foe, thus—," which he declares "oratorically" while "gesticulating with a long ruler." His use of this military imagery expresses his desire for a more strategic role than his status as a copyist permits him. As in Anna Freud's example in children, only as Turkey "transforms reality by denying it by means of fantasy ... could he accept it" [*The Analysis of Defense*]. Turkey's frustration is most clearly represented in a gesture that reflects his cavalier rhetoric and ironic social indignity: "Rashest of all the fiery afternoon blunders and flurried rashnesses of Turkey, was his once moistening a ginger-cake between his lips, and clapping it on to a mortgage, for a seal."

Like Turkey, Nippers also attempts to deny his station as mere copyist, a denial the lawyer interprets as a "diseased ambition." Nippers' ego and id also enjoy alternate ascendancy, making him feisty and restive in the morning while contentedly passive in the afternoon. When his ambitious id takes on a "grand air," Nippers imagines himself to be an autonomous man of affairs. In such states Nippers tries to deceive the skeptical lawyer:

Among the manifestations of his diseased ambition was a fondness he had for receiving visits from certain ambiguous-looking fellows in seedy coats, whom he called his clients.... I have good reason to believe, however, that one individual who called upon him at my chambers, and who with a grand air, he insisted was his client, was no other than a dun, and the alleged title-deed, a bill.

Nippers reinforces his desire to be other than a copyist of law documents with a "gentlemanly sort of deportment," ambitiously dressing in a "gentlemanly sort of way." While his ego civilizes his ambition into identification with the lawyer in the afternoon, his id more clearly articulates his frustration in the morning, leading him to grind his teeth together in "maledictions hissed, rather than spoken." Even the fact that he hisses his curses upon life rather than speaks them is a rebellion against the verbal restrictions imposed upon him as a copyist of law documents. Like the lawyer's whose vacillating ego defenses surface in his changing responses to Bartleby, Nippers' psychomachia displays itself in his inability to comfortably adjust his desk height. In a rare burst of insight the lawyer declares that "the truth of the matter was, Nippers knew not what he wanted." Thus, like Turkey and his drinking ale and crunching ginger cakes, and the lawyer with his orderliness and money, Nippers illustrates the result of a conflict between the id and the ego as a compulsion neurosis. In Nippers' case, his constant adjustment of his desk is a "displacement onto a small detail" [*The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*], of his ego's inability to find pleasure within the narrow limits of his Wall-Street world.

On the far left of the Wall-Street ego continuum is Bartleby. More precisely stated, in the course of the tale he moves to that extreme. While Turkey and Nippers have reached a kind of metaphysical stasis between discontent (id) and resignation (ego), Bartleby's behavior reflects the diminishing ability of his ego to sustain

the external conventions of the Wall-Street world. However, the usually overlooked fact that he seeks a job at the lawyer's offices indicates that at the tale's beginning he is not ready or able to forsake all of Wall Street's conventions or to give in fully to the impulses of the id. Our first glimpses of Bartleby indicate the degree of his ego's deterioration. Like the other copyists, Bartleby's appearance suggests traces of the gentlemanly Wall-Street conventions, but the "pallidly neat" and "pitiably respectable" condition of his appearance reflects the increasing inability of his ego to feign those conventions. Another suggestive contrast between Bartleby and the other copyists is in their similarly erratic work habits. While Turkey's and Nippers' conflicting impulses are in symmetrical check, allowing them to meet the lawyer's minimum professional expectations at least half of each day, Bartleby's id continually breaks down his ego's defenses until the lawyer is strained even beyond his ability to rationalize Bartleby's antisocial behavior. As Bartleby successively refuses to check copy, to copy documents, to move, to talk, and finally to eat, we see a deeper manifestation of—in fact an extension of—the neuroses of the other two copyists.

In the process of his id taking control from his ego, Bartleby actually negates his ego by making the lawyer a "negative ruler of the soul" [*Psychiatric Dictionary*]. Thus, in identifying with and then differentiating himself completely from the lawyer, Bartleby becomes compelled to do the opposite of the lawyer, or the opposite of what the lawyer would like him to do. This is clearly illustrated in Bartleby's galling refusal to be cooperative: "At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable." Also, Bartleby's nonsensical rejections of the potential career ideas the lawyer gives him—"I am not particular"—seem calculated to needle the lawyer.

Melville's shattering message, finally, is the impossibility of language—the external and ultimate convention of the ego—to penetrate the dead-blind wall of reality in the modern world.

—Dennis R. Perry

Bartleby increasingly becomes aware of and resigned to the sterile life on Wall Street, and rather than trying to deny that reality by the creation of a false rhetoric as do Nippers and Turkey. Bartleby adopts a rhetoric that mimics the speech of the documents he copies. Ironically, by using copy-speech, Bartleby unconsciously re-creates himself in Wall Street's image. This response is a counterphobic reaction, relieving the anxiety he experiences with the struggle between his id and ego. The basic similarity between this response and the behavior patterns of the other characters is indicated humorously in the infectiousness of Bartleby's copy-speech on his fellow scribes and on the lawyer himself: "Somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word 'prefer' upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions." Bartleby is related intimately to the other scribes, then, as one who reacts to the artificiality of the Wall-Street world. In any case, the lawyer, like his scribes, is affected by Bartleby, and Melville's comic tale darkens as it records the lawyer's and Bartleby's movement along the Wall-Street continuum—a simultaneous movement that epitomizes the inevitable fate of all humanity trapped in its own decaying systems of arbitrary conventions and linguistic clichés.

In effect, as his id begins to dominate, Bartleby's development becomes the reverse of the socialization process. This is what places him on the opposite end of the Wall-Street continuum from the lawyer whose ego is the most powerfully developed throughout most of the story. While people normally develop and mature as the ego learns to control the id, Bartleby's id has reestablished psychological control and the tale is his desocialization into the quiescence of childhood. Even his limited speech, which mimics copy-speech, is the speech of a child taking familiar words and repeating them sparingly. And, like a child, Bartleby does what he "prefers" to do, not what social convention and the ego would have him do. While Turkey and Nippers adopt the childish ability to fantasize—the id's way of pretending to socialize—Bartleby's return is to pre-fantasy infancy. Without a knowledge of convention one cannot fantasize. Also like an infant, Bartleby becomes more and more helpless, unable to move or take care of himself. His id has none of the ego's instinct for self-preservation. Significantly, our last image of Bartleby is as a fetus, curled helplessly before the prison wall.

While *Bartleby* represents the limits of modern neuroses, his response to Wall Street can only be understood in the context of the neuroses of the other characters. Together they suggest the ways the ego and id struggle to define the self in the crisis state of a Wall-Street world. Thus, the tale's power derives from the fact that *Bartleby* is not an isolated case, a freak who alone cannot handle modern life. Rather, what disturbs us is that the "normal" characters are intimately related to him and fight the same neurotic battles. The lawyer's story of his scribes becomes, finally, a test of his and our comfortable rhetorical strategies that insulate from the incursions of the id, devices of the ego to make sense of experience. Fenichel notes that "the compulsion neurotic ... flees from the macrocosm of things to the microcosm of words." The narration process, therefore, allows the lawyer to achieve mastery over the events themselves, his attempt to resurrect what *Bartleby's* words had killed. Melville's shattering message, finally, is the impossibility of language—the external and ultimate convention of the ego—to penetrate the dead-blind wall of reality in the modern world.

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Bartleby, the Scrivener Melville, Herman: Introduction

"Bartleby, the Scrivener" Melville, Herman

American novelist and short story writer.

The following entry presents criticism of Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street," first published in two installments on November 1 and December 1, 1853, in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*. See also Benito Cereno Criticism, Billy Budd Criticism, Pierre, or, The Ambiguities Criticism, and Redburn: His First Voyage Criticism.

The account of a young man's inability to conform to life on Wall Street in the mid-nineteenth century, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is hailed by some scholars as the first modern American short story for its break with the moralizing, overt allegorizing, romantic characters, form, and other traits of earlier, traditional tales. More critical attention has been devoted to "Bartleby, the Scrivener" than any other short story by Melville, and the work's symbolic suggestiveness, thematic depth, and narrative ambiguity ensure its continuing appeal. Lea Bertani Vozar Newman has observed: "Whatever other chords 'Bartleby' may touch in the reader, the alienation that links this story to works by Dostoevsky, Kafka, and Camus attests to its modernity."

Plot and Major Characters

"Bartleby, the Scrivener" is narrated by a Wall Street lawyer who deals in investment opportunities for wealthy clients. A recent hire, Bartleby, works diligently at first copying legal documents but gradually begins to decline his responsibilities with the statement "I would prefer not to." Eventually Bartleby refrains from all copying and stares at the wall immediately outside of a window in the law office. Only when clients become affected by Bartleby's idiosyncratic and unnerving behavior does the lawyer take significant action, choosing to move his place of business to another building rather than fire Bartleby, who "would prefer not to" quit the lawyer's service; Bartleby refuses to vacate the building and is consequently jailed for vagrancy. The narrator, feeling somehow responsible for Bartleby's condition and incarceration, visits Bartleby, whom he finds dead from self-imposed starvation. At the conclusion of the story, the narrator relates a rumor about Bartleby's occupation prior to becoming a scrivener: Bartleby worked in the postal service's dead-letter office, where all lost, improperly addressed, or otherwise undeliverable mail ends.

Major Themes

Of "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Lewis Leary has stated: "Its charm resides in what Melville preferred not to reveal, so that no one key opens it to simple, or single, or precise meaning." Much of the story's complexity originates in the limited narrative perspective of the lawyer, who unintentionally reveals more about himself than he intends while relating the few facts known about Bartleby. As a result, differing and sometimes conflicting themes have been attributed to the story. Some interpretations focus on the lawyer, variously characterizing him as self-serving or well-meaning; Bartleby has been perceived as psychotic, comical, nihilistic, Christ-like, or devoid of a social persona. As well, Bartleby is commonly identified as the portrait of a writer alienated by society for his refusal to "copy" the formula established by popular writers. Other commentators, focusing on the bleak mood and conclusion of the story, describe "Bartleby, the Scrivener" as a condemnation of capitalist society, a statement on the absurdity of life, or a disheartening existentialist commentary. Further interpretations present the story as a satire of specific historical individuals, a parable about failed Christian charity, a critique of contemporary philosophies, or a metaphor for the divided psyche of an individual; still another set of essays explicate "Bartleby, the Scrivener" in terms of Melville's other works.

Critical Reception

Written in the wake of *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852), which were regarded as critical and popular failures during his lifetime, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is Melville's first published short story. Financially strapped by the poor reception of his earlier efforts, Melville began contributing stories and sketches through the mid-1850s to popular magazines as a source of steady income. His short fiction was on the whole favorably received but Melville died generally unknown and unappreciated. The novella *Billy Budd*, left in manuscript at his death, was not published until 1924. Its appearance, along with Raymond M. Weaver's 1921 biography *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic* and other critical attention, led to a revival of interest in the Melville canon. Most commentators at this time emphasized the autobiographical element of "Bartleby, the Scrivener," contending that the author intended to depict an artist misunderstood by society. Another early and influential school of critics applied a psychological approach, diagnosing Bartleby as schizophrenic, manic depressive, autistic, or mad. The complex and subtle critical history of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is best encapsulated in essays by Lea Bertani Vozar Newman and Milton R. Stern.

Criticism: Leo Marx (essay date 1953)

SOURCE: "Melville's Parable of the Walls," in *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. LXI, No. 4, Autumn, 1953, pp. 602-27.

[Marx is an American educator and critic. In the following seminal essay, he examines the autobiographical aspect of "Bartleby, the Scrivener," focusing on the symbol of the walls and the depiction of the artist's situation in society]

Dead,

25. Of a wall . . . : Unbroken, unrelieved by breaks or interruptions; absolutely uniform and continuous.

—*New English Dictionary*

In the spring of 1851, while still at work on *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville wrote his celebrated "dollars damn me" letter to Hawthorne:

In a week or so, I go to New York, to bury myself in a third-story room, and work and slave on my "Whale" while it is driving through the press. *That* is the only way I can finish it now—I am so pulled hither and thither by circumstances. The calm, the coolness, the silent grassgrowing mood in which a man *ought* always to compose, —that, I fear, can seldom be mine. Dollars damn me. . . . My dear Sir, a presentiment is on me, —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.

He went on and wrote the "Whale" as he felt moved to write it; the public was apathetic and most critics were cool. Nevertheless Melville stubbornly refused to return to the *other* way, to his more successful earlier modes, the South Sea romance and the travel narrative. In 1852 he published *Pierre*, a novel even more certain not to be popular. And this time the critics were vehemently hostile. Then, the following year, Melville turned to shorter fiction. "Bartleby the Scrivener," the first of his stories, dealt with a problem unmistakably like the one Melville had described to Hawthorne.

There are excellent reasons for reading "Bartleby" as a parable having to do with Melville's own fate as a writer. To begin with, the story *is* about a kind of writer, a "copyist" in a Wall Street lawyer's office. Furthermore, the copyist is a man who obstinately refuses to go on doing the sort of writing demanded of him. Under the circumstances there can be little doubt about the connection between Bartleby's dilemma and Melville's own. Although some critics have noted the autobiographical relevance of this facet of the story, a close examination of the parable reveals a more detailed parallel with Melville's situation than has been suggested. In fact the theme itself can be described in a way which at once establishes a more precise relation. "Bartleby" is not only about a writer who refuses to conform to the demands of society, but it is, more relevantly, about a writer who foresakes conventional modes because of an irresistible preoccupation with the most baffling philosophical questions. This shift of Bartleby's attention is the symbolic equivalent of Melville's own shift of interest between *Typee* and *Moby Dick*. And it is significant that Melville's story, read in this light, does not by any means proclaim the desirability of the change. It was written in a time of deep hopelessness, and as I shall attempt to show, it reflects Melville's doubts about the value of his recent work.

Indeed, if I am correct about what this parable means, it has immense importance, for it provides the most explicit and mercilessly self-critical statement of his own dilemma that Melville has left us. Perhaps it is because "Bartleby" reveals so much of his situation that Melville took such extraordinary pains to mask its meaning. This may explain why he chose to rely upon symbols which derive from his earlier work, and to handle them with so light a touch that only the reader who comes to the story after an immersion in the other novels can be expected to see how much is being said here. Whatever Melville's motive may have been, I believe it may legitimately be accounted a grave defect of the parable that we must go back to *Typee* and *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* for the clues to its meaning. It is as if Melville had decided that the only adequate test of a reader's qualifications for sharing so damaging a self-revelation was a thorough reading of his own work.

"Bartleby the Scrivener" is a parable about a particular kind of writer's relations to a particular kind of society. The subtitle, "A Story of Wall Street," provides the first clue about the nature of the society. It is a commercial society, dominated by a concern with property and finance.

Most of the action takes place in Wall Street. But the designation has a further meaning: as Melville describes the street it literally becomes a walled street. The walls are the controlling symbols of the story, and in fact it may be said that this is a parable of walls, the walls which hem in the meditative artist and for that matter every reflective man. Melville also explicitly tells us that certain prosaic facts are "indispensable" to an understanding of the story. These facts fall into two categories: first, details concerning the personality and profession of the narrator, the center of consciousness in this tale, and more important, the actual floor-plan of his chambers.

The narrator is a Wall Street lawyer. One can easily surmise that at this unhappy turning point in his life Melville was fascinated by the problem of seeing what his sort of writer looked like to a representative American. For his narrator he therefore chose, as he did in "Benito Cereno," which belongs to the same period, a man of middling status with a propensity for getting along with people, but a man of distinctly limited perception. Speaking in lucid, matter-of-fact language, this observer of Bartleby's strange behavior describes himself as comfortable, methodical and prudent. He has prospered; he unabashedly tells of the praise with which John Jacob Astor has spoken of him. Naturally, he is a conservative, or as he says, an "eminently *safe*" man, proud of his snug traffic in rich men's bonds, mortgages and deeds. As he tells the story we are made to feel his mildness, his good humor, his satisfaction with himself and his way of life. He is the sort who prefers the remunerative though avowedly obsolete sinecure of the Mastership of Chancery, which has just been bestowed upon him when the action starts, to the exciting notoriety of the courtroom. He wants only to be left alone; nothing disturbs his complacency until Bartleby appears. As a spokesman for the society he is well chosen; he stands at its center and performs a critical role, unravelling and retying the invisible cords of property and equity which intertwine in Wall Street and bind the social system.

The lawyer describes his chambers with great care, and only when the plan of the office is clearly in mind can we find the key to the parable. Although the chambers are on the second floor, the surrounding buildings rise above them, and as a result only very limited vistas are presented to those inside the office. At each end the windows look out upon a wall. One of the walls, which is part of a sky-light shaft, is *white*. It provides the best light available, but even from the windows which open upon the white wall the sky is invisible. No direct rays of the sun penetrate the legal sanctum. The wall at the other end gives us what seems at first to be a sharply contrasting view of the outside world. It is a lofty brick structure within ten feet of the lawyer's window. It stands in an everlasting shade and is *black* with age; the space it encloses reminds the lawyer of a huge black cistern. But we are not encouraged to take this extreme black and white, earthward and skyward contrast at face value (readers of *Moby Dick* will recall how illusory colors can be), for the lawyer tells us that the two "views," in spite of their colors, have something very important in common: they are equally "deficient in what landscape painters call *life'." The difference in color is less important than the fact that what we see through each window is only a wall.

This is all we are told about the arrangement of the chambers until Bartleby is hired. When the lawyer is appointed Master in Chancery he requires the services of another copyist. He places an advertisement, Bartleby appears, and the lawyer hastily checks his qualifications and hires him. Clearly the lawyer cares little about Bartleby's previous experience; the kind of writer wanted in Wall Street need merely be one of the great interchangeable white-collar labor force. It is true that Bartleby seems to him peculiarly pitiable and forlorn, but on the other hand the lawyer is favorably impressed by his neat, respectable appearance. So sedate does he seem that the boss decides to place Bartleby's desk close to his own. This is his first mistake; he thinks it will be useful to have so quiet and apparently tractable a man within easy call. He does not understand Bartleby then or at any point until their difficult relationship ends.

When Bartleby arrives we discover that there is also a kind of wall inside the office. It consists of the ground-glass folding-doors which separate the lawyer's desk, and now Bartleby's, from the desks of the other employees, the copyists and the office boy. Unlike the walls outside the windows, however, this is a social barrier men can cross, and the lawyer makes a point of telling us that he opens and shuts these doors according to *his* humor. Even when they are shut, it should be noted, the ground glass provides at least an illusion of penetrability quite different from the opaqueness of the walls outside.

So far we have been told of only two possible views of the external world which are to be had from the office, one black and the other white. It is fitting that the coming of a writer like Bartleby is what makes us aware of another view, one neither black nor white, but a quite distinct third view which is now added to the topography of the Wall Street microcosm.

I placed his desk close up to a small side-window in that part of the room [a corner near the folding-doors]—a window which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain grimy back yards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light. Within three feet of the panes was a wall, and the light came down from far above, between two lofty buildings, as from a very small opening in a dome. Still further to a satisfactory arrangement, I procured a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice. And thus, in a manner, privacy and society were conjoined.

Notice that of all the people in the office Bartleby is to be in the best possible position to make a close scrutiny of a wall. His is only three feet away. And although the narrator mentions that the new writer's window offers "no view at all," we recall that he has, paradoxically, used the word "view" a moment before to describe the walled vista to be had through the other windows. Actually every window in the office looks out upon some sort of wall; the important difference between Bartleby and the others is that he is closest to a wall. Another notable difference is implied by the lawyer's failure to specify the color of Bartleby's wall. Apparently it is almost colorless, or blank. This also enhances the new man's ability to scrutinize and know the wall which limits his vision; he does not have to contend with the illusion of blackness or whiteness. Only Bartleby faces the stark problem of perception presented by the walls. For him external reality thus takes on some of the character it had for Ishmael, who knew that color did not reside in objects, and therefore saw beyond the deceptive whiteness of the whale to "a colorless, all-color of atheism." As we shall see, only the nature of the wall with which the enigmatic Bartleby is confronted can account for his strange behavior later.

What follows (and it is necessary to remember that all the impressions we receive are the lawyer's) takes place in three consecutive movements: Bartleby's gradually stiffening resistance to the Wall Street routine, then a series of attempts by the lawyer to enforce the scrivener's conformity, and finally, society's punishment of the recalcitrant writer.

During the first movement Bartleby holds the initiative. After he is hired he seems content to remain in the quasiisolation provided by the "protective" *green* screen and to work silently and industriously. This screen, too, is a kind of wall, and its color, as will become apparent, means a great deal. Although Bartleby seems pleased with it and places great reliance upon it, the screen is an extremely in-effectual wall. It is the flimsiest of all the walls in and out of the office; it has most in common with the ground glass door—both are "folding," that is, susceptible to human manipulation.

Bartleby likes his job, and in fact at first seems the exemplar of the writer wanted by Wall Street. Like Melville himself in the years between *Typee* and *Pierre*, he is an ardent and indefatigable worker; Bartleby impresses the lawyer with probably having "been long famished for something to copy." He copies by sun-light and candle-light, and his employer, although he does detect a curiously silent and mechanical quality in Bartleby's behavior, is well satisfied.

The first sign of trouble is Bartleby's refusal to "check copy." It is customary for the scriveners to help each other in this dull task, but when Bartleby is first asked to do it, to everyone's astonishment, he simply says that he prefers not to. From the lawyer's point of view "to verify the accuracy of his copy" is an indispensable part of the writer's job. But evidently Bartleby is the sort of writer who is little concerned with the detailed accuracy of his work, or in any case he does not share the lawyer's standards of accuracy. This passage is troublesome because the words "verify accuracy" seem to suggest a latter-day conception of "realism." For Melville to imply that what the public wanted of him in 1853 was a kind of "realism" is not plausible on historical grounds. But if we recall the nature of the "originals" which the lawyer wants impeccably copied the incident makes sense. These documents are mortgages and title-deeds, and they incorporate the official version of social (property) relations as they exist at the time. It occurs to the lawyer that "the mettlesome poet, Byron" would not have acceded to such a demand either. And like the revolutionary poet, Bartleby

apparently cares nothing for "common usage" or "common sense"—a lawyer's way of saying that this writer does not want his work to embody a faithful copy of human relations as they are conceived in the Street.

After this we hear over and over again the reiterated refrain of Bartleby's nay-saying. To every request that he do something other than copy he replies with his deceptively mild, "I would prefer not to." He adamantly refuses to verify the accuracy of copy, or to run errands, or to do anything but write. But it is not until much later that the good-natured lawyer begins to grasp the seriousness of his employee's passive resistance. A number of things hinder his perception. For one thing he admits that he is put off by the writer's impassive mask (he expresses himself only in his work); this and the fact that there seems nothing "ordinarily human" about him saves Bartleby from being fired on the spot. Then, too, his business preoccupations constantly "hurry" the lawyer away from considering what to do about Bartleby. He has more important things to think about; and since the scrivener unobtrusively goes on working in his green hermitage, the lawyer continues to regard him as a "valuable acquisition."

On this typically pragmatic basis the narrator has become reconciled to Bartleby until, one Sunday, when most people are in church, he decides to stop at his office. Before-hand he tells us that there are several keys to this Wall Street world, four in fact, and that he himself has one, one of the other copyists has another, and the scrub woman has the third. (Apparently the representative of each social stratum has its own key.) But there is a fourth key he cannot account for. When he arrives at the office, expecting it to be deserted, he finds to his amazement that Bartleby is there. (If this suggests, however, that Bartleby holds the missing key, it is merely an intimation, for we are never actually provided with explicit evidence that he does, a detail which serves to underline Melville's misgivings about Bartleby's conduct throughout the story.) After waiting until Bartleby has a chance to leave, the lawyer enters and soon discovers that the scrivener has become a permanent resident of his Wall Street chambers, that he sleeps and eats as well as works there.

At this strange discovery the narrator feels mixed emotions. On the one hand the effrontery, the vaguely felt sense that his rights are being subverted, angers him. He thinks his actual identity, manifestly inseparable from his property rights, is threatened. "For I consider that one . . . is somehow unmanned when he tranquilly permits his hired clerk to dictate to him, and order him away from his own premises." But at the same time the lawyer feels pity at the thought of this man inhabiting the silent desert that is Wall Street on Sunday. Such abject friendlessness and loneliness draws him, by the bond of common humanity, to sympathize with the horrible solitude of the writer. So horrible is this solitude that it provokes in his mind a premonitory image of the scrivener's "pale form . . . laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding sheet." He is reminded of the many "quiet mysteries" of the man, and of the "long periods he would stand looking out, at his pale window behind the screen, upon the *dead brick wall*." The lawyer now is aware that death is somehow an important constituent of that no-color wall which comprises Bartleby's view of reality. After this we hear several times of the forlorn writer immobilized in a "*dead-wall revery*." He is obsessed by the wall of death which stands between him and a more ample reality than he finds in Wall Street.

The puzzled lawyer now concludes that Bartleby is the victim of an "innate" or "incurable" disorder; he decides to question him, and if that reveals nothing useful, to dismiss him. But his efforts to make Bartleby talk about himself fail. Communication between the writer and the rest of Wall Street society has almost completely broken down. The next day the lawyer notices that Bartleby now remains permanently fixed in a "*dead-wall revery*." He questions the writer, who calmly announces that he has given up all writing. "And what is the reason?" asks the lawyer. "Do you not see the reason for yourself?" Bartleby enigmatically replies. The lawyer looks, and the only clue he finds is the dull and glazed look of Bartleby's eyes. It occurs to him that the writer's "unexampled diligence" in copying may have had this effect upon his eyes, particularly since he has been working near the dim window. (The light surely is very bad, since the wall is only three feet away.) If the lawyer is correct in assuming that the scrivener's vision has been "temporarily impaired" (Bartleby never admits it himself) then it is the proximity of the colorless *dead-wall* which has incapacitated him. As a writer he has become paralyzed by trying to work in the shadow of the philosophic problems

represented by the wall. From now on Bartleby does nothing but stand and gaze at the impenetrable wall.

Here Melville might seem to be abandoning the equivalence he has established between Bartleby's history and his own. Until he chooses to have Bartleby stop writing and stare at the wall the parallel between his career as a writer and Bartleby's is transparently close. The period immediately following the scrivener's arrival at the office, when he works with such exemplary diligence and apparent satisfaction, clearly corresponds to the years after Melville's return to America, when he so industriously devoted himself to his first novels. And Bartleby's intransigence ("I prefer not to") corresponds to Melville's refusal ("Yet. . . write the *other* way I cannot.") to write another *Omoo*, or, in his own words, another "beggarly *Redburn*." Bartleby's switch from copying what he is told to copy to staring at the wall is therefore, presumably, the emblematic counterpart to that stage in Melville's career when he shifted from writing best-selling romances to a preoccupation with the philosophic themes which dominate *Mardi*, *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*. But the question is, can we accept Bartleby's merely passive staring at the blank wall as in any sense a parallel to the state of mind in which Melville wrote the later novels?

The answer, if we recall who is telling the story, is Yes. This is the lawyer's story, and in his eyes, as in the eyes of Melville's critics and the public, this stage of his career *is* artistically barren; his turn to metaphysical themes *is* in fact the equivalent of ceasing to write. In the judgment of his contemporaries Melville's later novels are no more meaningful than Bartleby's absurd habit of staring at the dead-wall. Writing from the point of view of the Wall Street lawyer, Melville accepts the popular estimate of his work and of his life. [In a footnote the critic adds: "It is not unreasonable to speculate that Melville's capacity for entertaining this negative view of his work is in fact a symptom of his own doubts about it. Was there some truth to the view that he was merely talking to himself? He may have asked himself this question at the time, and it must be admitted that this fear, at least in the case of *Pierre* and *Mardi*, is not without basis in fact."] The scrivener's trance-like stare is the surrealistic device with which Melville leads us into the nightmare world where he sees himself as his countrymen do. It is a world evoked by terror, and particularly the fear that he may have allowed himself to get disastrously out of touch with actuality. Here the writer's refusal to produce what the public wants is a ludicrous mystery. He loses all capacity to convey ideas. He becomes a prisoner of his own consciousness. "Bartleby the Scrivener" is an imaginative projection of that premonition of exhaustion and death which Melville had described to Hawthorne.

To return to the story. With his decision to stop copying the first, or "Bartleby," movement ends. For him writing is the only conceivable kind of action, and during the rest of his life he is therefore incapable of action or, for that matter, of making any choice except that of utter passivity. When he ceases to write he begins to die. He remains a fixture in the lawyer's chamber, and it is the lawyer who now must take the initiative. Although the lawyer is touched by the miserable spectacle of the inert writer, he is a practical man, and he soon takes steps to rid himself of the useless fellow.

He threatens Bartleby, but the writer cannot be frightened. He tries to bribe him, but money holds no appeal for Bartleby. Finally he conceives what he thinks to be a "masterly" plan; he will simply convey to the idle writer that he "assumes" Bartleby, now that he has ceased to be productive, will vacate the premises. But when he returns to the office after having communicated this assumption, which he characteristically thinks is universally acceptable, he finds Bartleby still at his window. This "doctrine of assumptions", as he calls it, fails because he and the writer patently share no assumptions whatsoever about either human behavior or the nature of reality. However, if Bartleby refuses to accept the premises upon which the Wall Street world operates, he also refuses to leave. We later see that the only escape available to Bartleby is by way of prison or death.

Bartleby stays on, and then an extraordinary thing happens. After yet another abortive attempt to communicate with the inarticulate scrivener the narrator finds himself in such a state of nervous indignation that he is suddenly afraid he may murder Bartleby. The fear recalls to his mind the Christian doctrine of

charity, though he still tends, as Melville's Confidence Man does later, to interpret the doctrine according to self-interest: it pays to be charitable. However, this partial return to a Christian view leads him on toward metaphysical speculation, and it is here that he finds the help he needs. After reading Jonathan Edwards on the will and Joseph Priestley on necessity, both Christian determinists (though one is a Calvinist and the other on the road to Unitarianism), he becomes completely reconciled to his relationship with Bartleby. He infers from these theologians that it is his fate to furnish Bartleby with the means of subsistence. This excursion in Protestant theology teaches him a kind of resignation; he decides to accept the inexplicable situation without further effort to understand or alleviate the poor scrivener's suffering.

At this point we have reached a stasis and the second, or "lawyer's" movement ends. He accepts his relation to Bartleby as "some purpose of an allwise Providence." As a Christian he can tolerate the obstinate writer although he cannot help him. And it is an ironic commentary upon this fatalistic explanation of what has happened that the lawyer's own activities from now on are to be explicitly directed not, insofar as the evidence of the story can be taken as complete, by any supernatural force, but rather by the Wall Street society itself. Now it seems that it is the nature of the social order which determines Bartleby's fate. (The subtitle should be recalled; it is after all Wall Street's story too.) For the lawyer admits that were it not for his professional friends and clients he would have condoned Bartleby's presence indefinitely. But the sepulchral figure of the scrivener hovering in the background of business conferences causes understandable uneasiness among the men of the Street. Businessmen are perplexed and disturbed by writers, particularly writers who don't write. When they ask Bartleby to fetch a paper and he silently declines, they are offended. Recognizing that his reputation must suffer, the lawyer again decides that the situation is intolerable. He now sees that the mere presence of a writer who does not accept Wall Street assumptions has a dangerously inhibiting effect upon business. Bartleby seems to cast a gloom over the office, and more disturbing, his attitude implies a denial of all authority. Now, more clearly than before, the lawyer is aware that Bartleby jeopardizes the sacred right of private property itself, for the insubordinate writer in the end may "outlive" him and so "claim possession . . . [of his office] by right of perpetual occupancy" (a wonderful touch!). If this happens, of course, Bartleby's unorthodox assumptions rather than the lawyer's will eventually dominate the world of Wall Street. The lawyer's friends, by "relentless remarks," bring great pressure to bear upon him, and henceforth the lawyer is in effect an instrument of the great power of social custom, which forces him to take action against the nonconforming writer.

When persuasion fails another time, the only new stratagem which the lawyer can conceive is to change offices. This he does, and in the process removes the portable green screen which has provided what little defense Bartleby has had against his environment. The inanimate writer is left "the motionless occupant of a naked room." However, it soon becomes clear to the lawyer that it is not so easy to abdicate his responsibility. Soon he receives a visit from a stranger who reports that the scrivener still inhabits the old building. The lawyer refuses to do anything further. But a few days later several excited persons, including his former landlord, confront him with the news that Bartleby not only continues to haunt the building, but that the whole structure of Wall Street society is in danger of being undermined. By this time Bartleby's rebellion has taken on an explicitly revolutionary character: "Everyone is concerned," the landlord tells the lawyer, "clients are leaving the offices; some fears are entertained of a mob. . . ."

Fear of exposure in the public press now moves the lawyer to seek a final interview with the squatter. This time he offers Bartleby a series of new jobs. To each offer the scrivener says no, although in every case he asserts that he is "not particular" about what he does; that is, all the jobs are equally distasteful to him. Desperate because of his inability to frighten Bartleby's "immobility into compliance," the lawyer is driven to make a truly charitable offer: he asks the abject copyist to come home with him. (The problem of dealing with the writer gradually brings out the best in this complacent American.) But Bartleby does not want charity; he prefers to stay where he is.

Then the narrator actually escapes. He leaves the city, and when he returns there is word that the police have removed Bartleby to the Tombs as a vagrant. (He learns that even physical compulsion was unable to shake the writer's impressive composure, and that he had silently obeyed the orders of the police.) There is an official request for the lawyer to appear and make a statement of the facts. He feels a mixture of indignation and approval at the news. At the prison he finds Bartleby standing alone in the "inclosed grass-platted yards" silently facing a high wall. Renewing his efforts to get through to the writer, all the lawyer can elicit is a cryptic "I know where I am." A moment later Bartleby turns away and again takes up a position "fronting the dead-wall." The wall, with its deathlike character, completely engages Bartleby. Whether "free" or imprisoned he has no concern for anything but the omnipresent and impenetrable wall. Taking the last resort of the "normal" man, the lawyer concludes that Bartleby is out of his mind.

A few days pass and the lawyer returns to the Tombs only to find that they have become, for Bartleby, literally a tomb. He discovers the wasted figure of the writer huddled up at the base of a wall, dead, but with his dim eyes open.

In a brief epilogue the lawyer gives us a final clue to Bartleby's story. He hears a vague report which he asserts has a "certain suggestive interest"; it is that Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington. There is some reason to believe, in other words, that Bartleby's destiny, his appointed vocation in this society, had been that of a writer who handled communications for which there were no recipients—PERSON UNKNOWN AT THIS ADDRESS. The story ends with the lawyer's heart-felt exclamation of pity for Bartleby and humankind.

What did Melville think of Bartleby? The lawyer's notion that Bartleby was insane is of course not to be taken at face value. For when the scrivener says that he knows where he is we can only believe that he does, and the central irony is that there was scarcely a difference, so far as the writer's freedom was concerned, between the prison and Wall Street. In Wall Street Bartleby did not read or write or talk or go anywhere or eat any dinners (he refuses to eat them in prison too) or, for that matter, do anything which normally would distinguish the free man from the prisoner in solitary confinement. And, of course, the office in which he had worked was enclosed by walls. How was this to be distinguished from the place where he died?

The yard was entirely quiet. It was not accessible to the common prisoners. The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by the birds, had sprung.

At first glance the most striking difference between the Wall Street office and the prison is that here in prison there are four walls, while only three had been visible from the lawyer's windows. On reflection, however, we recall that the side of the office containing the door, which offered a kind of freedom to the others, was in effect a fourth wall for Bartleby. He had refused to walk through it. The plain inference is that he acknowledged no distinction between the lawyer's chambers and the world outside; his problem was not to be solved by leaving the office, or by leaving Wall Street; indeed, from Bartleby's point of view, Wall Street *was* America. The difference between Wall Street and the Tombs was an illusion of the lawyer's, not Bartleby's. In the prison yard, for example, the lawyer is disturbed because he thinks he sees, through the slits of the jail windows, the "eyes of murderers and thieves" peering at the dying Bartleby. (He has all along been persuaded of the writer's incorruptible honesty.) But the writer knows where he is, and he offers no objection to being among thieves. Such minor distinctions do not interest him. For him the important thing is that he still fronts the same dead-wall which has always impinged upon his consciousness, and upon the mind of man since the beginning of time. (Notice the archaic Egyptian character of the prison wall.) Bartleby has come as close to the wall as any man can hope to do. He finds that it is absolutely impassable, and that it is not, as the Ahab of the world would like to think, merely a pasteboard mask through which man can strike. The masonry is of

"amazing thickness."

Then why has Bartleby allowed the wall to paralyze him? The others in the office are not disturbed by the walls; in spite of the poor light they are able to do their work. Is it possible that Bartleby's suffering is, to some extent, self-inflicted? that it is symptomatic of the perhaps morbid fear of annihilation manifested in his preoccupation with the dead-wall? Melville gives us reason to suspect as much. For Bartleby has come to regard the walls as permanent, immovable parts of the structure of things, comparable to man's inability to surmount the limitations of his sense perceptions, or comparable to death itself. He has forgotten to take account of the fact that these particular walls which surround the office are, after all, man-made. They are products of society, but he has imputed eternity to them. In his disturbed mind metaphysical problems which seem to be timeless concomitants of the condition of man and problems created by the social order are inextricably joined, joined in the symbol of the wall.

And yet, even if we grant that Bartleby's tortured imagination has had a part in creating his dead-wall, Melville has not ignored society's share of responsibility for the writer's fate. There is a sense in which Bartleby's state of mind may be understood as a response to the hostile world of Wall Street. Melville has given us a fact of the utmost importance: the window through which Bartleby had stared at the wall had "originally . . . afforded a lateral view of certain grimy backyards and bricks, but . . . owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light." Melville's insinuation is that the wall, whatever its symbolic significance for Bartleby, actually served as an impediment to (or substitute for?) the writer's vision of the world around him. This is perhaps the most awesome moment in Melville's cold self-examination. The whole fable consists of a surgical probing of Bartleby's motives, and here he questions the value, for a novelist, of those metaphysical themes which dominate his later work. What made Bartleby turn to the wall? There is the unmistakable hint that such themes (fixing his attention on "subsequent erections") had had the effect of shielding from view the sordid social scene ("grimy backyards and bricks") with which Melville, for example, had been more directly concerned in earlier novels such as *Redburn* or *White Jacket*. At this point we are apparently being asked to consider whether Bartleby's obsession was perhaps a palliative, a defense against social experience which had become more than he could stand. To this extent the nature of the Wall Street society has contributed to Bartleby's fate. What is important here, however, is that Melville does not exonerate the writer by placing all the onus upon society. Bartleby has made a fatal mistake.

Melville's analysis of Bartleby's predicament may be appallingly detached, but it is by no means unsympathetic. When he develops the contrast between a man like Bartleby and the typical American writers of his age there is no doubt where his sympathies lie. The other copyists in the office accept their status as wage earners. The relations between them are tinged by competitiveness—even their names, "Nippers" and "Turkey," suggest "nip and tuck." Nevertheless they are not completely satisfactory employees; they are "useful" to the lawyer only half of the time. During half of each day each writer is industrious and respectful and compliant; during the other half he tends to be recalcitrant and even mildly rebellious. But fortunately for their employer these half-men are never aggressive at the same time, and so he easily dominates them, he compels them to do the sort of writing he wants, and has them "verify the accuracy" of their work according to his standards. When Bartleby's resistance begins they characteristically waver between him and the lawyer. Half the time, in their "submissive" moods ("submission" is their favorite word as "prefer" is Bartleby's), they stand with the employer and are incensed against Bartleby, particularly when his resistance inconveniences *them*; the rest of the time they mildly approve of his behavior, since it expresses their own ineffectual impulses toward independence. Such are the writers the society selects and, though not too lavishly, rewards.

One of Melville's finest touches is the way he has these compliant and representative scribes, though they never actually enlist in Bartleby's cause, begin to echo his "prefer" without being aware of its source. So does the lawyer. "Prefer" is the nucleus of Bartleby's refrain, "I prefer not to," and it embodies the very essence of his power. It simply means "choice," but it is backed up, as it clearly is not in the case of the other copyists, by

will. And it is in the strength of his will that the crucial difference between Bartleby and other writers lies. When Nippers and Turkey use the word "prefer" it is only because they are unconsciously imitating the manner, the surface vocabulary of the truly independent writer; they say "prefer," but in the course of the parable they never make any real choices. In their mouths "prefer" actually is indistinguishable from "submission"; only in Bartleby's does it stand for a genuine act of will. In fact writers like Nippers and Turkey are incapable of action, a trait carefully reserved for Bartleby, the lawyer, and the social system itself (acting through various agencies, the lawyers' clients, the landlord, and the police). Bartleby represents the only real, if ultimately ineffective, threat to society; his experience gives some support to Henry Thoreau's view that one lone intransigent man can shake the foundations of our institutions.

But he can only shake them, and in the end the practical consequence of Bartleby's rebellion is that society has eliminated an enemy. The lawyer's premonition was true; he finally sees Bartleby in death. Again the story insinuates the most severe self-criticism. For the nearly lifeless Bartleby, attracted neither by the skyward tending white wall, nor the cistern-like black wall, had fixed his eyes on the "dead" wall. This wall of death which surrounds us, and which Melville's heroes so desperately needed to pierce, has much in common with the deadly White Whale. Even Ahab, who first spoke of the whale as a "pasteboard mask" through which man might strike, sensed this, and he significantly shifted images in the middle of his celebrated quarter-deck reply to Starbuck:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. . . . If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me.

Like the whale, the wall will destroy the man who tries too obstinately to penetrate it. Bartleby had become so obsessed by the problem of the dead-wall that his removal to prison hardly changed his condition, or, for that matter, the state of his being; even in the walled street he had allowed his life to become suffused by death.

The detachment with which Melville views Bartleby's situation is perhaps the most striking thing about the fable. He gives us a powerful and unequivocal case against Wall Street society for its treatment of the writer, yet he avoids the temptation of finding in social evil a sentimental sanction for everything his hero thinks and does. True, the society has been indifferent to Bartleby's needs and aspirations; it has demanded of him a kind of writing he prefers not to do; and, most serious of all, it has impaired his vision by forcing him to work in the shadow of its walls. Certainly society shares the responsibility for Bartleby's fate. But Melville will not go all the way with those who find in the guilt of society an excuse for the writer's every hallucination. To understand what led to Bartleby's behavior is not to condone it. Melville refuses to ignore the painful fact that even if society shares the blame for Bartleby's delusion, it was nevertheless a delusion. What ultimately killed this writer was not the walls themselves, but the fact that he confused the walls built by men with the wall of human mortality.

Is this, then, as F. O. Matthiessen has written, "a tragedy of utter negation"? If it is not it is because there is a clear if muted note of affirmation here which must not be ignored. In the end, in prison, we are made to feel that the action has somehow taken us closer to the mysterious source of positive values in Melville's universe. "And see," says the lawyer to Bartleby in the prison yard, "it is not so sad a place as one might think. Look, there is the sky, and here is the grass." To the lawyer the presence of the grass in the Tombs is as wonderful as its presence in the heart of eternal pyramids where "by some strange magic through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung." The saving power attributed to the green grass is the clue to Melville's affirmation. [In a footnote the critic adds: "Recall that two years before, in the letter to Hawthorne which I quoted at the beginning of this essay, Melville had contrasted the unhappy circumstances under which he wrote *Moby Dick* to 'the silent grass-growing mood in which a man *ought* always to compose.' Later in the same letter he described his own development in the identical image which comes to the mind of the lawyer in 'Bartleby':

I am like one of those seeds taken out of the Egyptian Pyramids, which, after being three thousand years a seed and nothing but a seed, being planted in English soil, it developed itself, grew to greenness, and then fell to the mould.

The fact that this same constellation of images reappears in 'Bartleby' in conjunction with the same theme (the contrast between two kinds of writing) seems to me conclusive evidence of the relation between the parable and the 'dollars damn me' letter."]

The green of the grass signifies everything that the walls, whether black or white or blank, do not. Most men who inhabit Wall Street merely accept the walls for what they are—man-made structures which compartmentalize experience. To Bartleby, however, they are abstract emblems of all the impediments to man's realization of his place in the universe. Only the lawyer sees that the outstanding characteristic of the walls, whether regarded as material objects or as symbols, is that they are "deficient in . . . 'life'." Green, on the other hand, *is* life. The color green is the key to a cluster of images of fecundity which recurs in Melville's work beginning with *Typee*. It is the color which dominates that tropical primitive isle. It is the color of growth and of all pastoral experience. Indeed the imminent disappearance of our agrarian society is an important motive for Ishmael's signing on the Pequod. "Are the green fields gone?" he asks as *Moby Dick* begins. And later he says, in describing the ecstasy of squeezing sperm: "I declare to you that for the time I lived as in a musky meadow." So he gives a green tint to his redeeming vision of "attainable felicity," a felicity which he says resides in the country, the wife, the heart, the bed—wherever, that is, men may know the magical life-giving force in the world. And *Pierre*, published the year before "Bartleby," also begins with a vision of a green paradise. There Melville makes his meaning explicit. He compares a certain green paint made of verdigris with the "democratic element [which] operates as subtile acid among us, forever producing new things by corroding the old. . . ."

Now in general nothing can be more significant of decay than the idea of corrosion; yet on the other hand, nothing can more vividly suggest luxuriance of life than the idea of green as a color; for green is the peculiar signet of all-fertile Nature herself.

By some curious quirk of the human situation, Bartleby's uncompromising resistance, which takes him to prison, also takes him a step closer to the green of animal faith. Melville deftly introduces this note of hope by having the lawyer compare the grass in the prison yard to the mystery of the grass within the pyramids. In time greenness, the lawyer suggests, may penetrate the most massive of walls. Indeed green seems virtually inherent in time itself, a somehow eternal property of man's universe. And in a Wall Street society it is (paradoxically) most accessible to the scrivener when he finds himself in prison and at the verge of death. Why? If Bartleby's suicidal obsession has taken him closer to grass and sky, are we to understand that it has had consequences both heartening and meaningful? Is Melville implying, in spite of all the reasons he has given us for being skeptical of Bartleby's motives, that an understanding of his fate may show us the way to a genuine affirmation? Before attempting to answer these questions, it is appropriate to note here how remarkable a fusion of manner and content Melville has achieved. While the questions are never explicitly asked, they are most carefully insinuated. The unique quality of this tale, in fact, resides in its ability to say almost nothing on its placid and inscrutable surface, and yet so powerfully to suggest that a great deal is being said. This quality of style is a perfect embodiment of the theme itself: concealed beneath the apparently meaningless if not mad behavior of Bartleby is a message of utmost significance to all men.

While the presence of the grass at Bartleby's death scene is the clue to Melville's affirmation, the affirmation can only exist outside of the scrivener's mind. Green now means nothing to him. In the Wall Street world he had known, the green fields *were* gone; he was able to see neither nor sky from the walled-in windows. The only green that remained was the artificial green painted upon his flimsy screen, the screen behind which he did his diligent early work. But the screen proved a chimerical means of protection. Again Melville seems to be pointing the most accusing questions at himself. Had not his early novels contained a strong ingredient of

primitivism? Had he not in effect relied upon the values implicit in the *Typee* experience (values which reappeared in the image of the inaccessible "insular Tahiti" in *Moby Dick*) as his shelter from the new America? Was this pastoral commitment of any real worth as a defense against a Wall Street society? The story of Bartleby and his green screen, like the letter to Hawthorne (dollars damn me!), denies that it was. In this fable, artificial or man-made green, used as a shield in a Wall Street office, merely abets self-delusion. As for the other green, the natural green of the grass in the prison yard, it is clear that Bartleby never apprehended its meaning. For one thing, a color could hardly have meant anything to him at that stage. His skepticism had taken him beyond any trust in the evidence of his senses; there is no reason to believe that green was for him any less illusory a color than the black or white of the walls. We know, moreover, that when he died Bartleby was still searching: he died with his eyes open.

It is not the writer but the lawyer, the complacent representative American, who is aware of the grass and to whom, therefore, the meaning is finally granted. If there is any hope indicated, it is hope for his, not Bartleby's, salvation. Recall that everything we understand of the scrivener's fate has come to us by way of the lawyer's consciousness. From the first the situation of the writer has been working upon the narrator's latent sensibility, gradually drawing upon his capacity for sympathy, his recognition of the bond between his desperate employee and the rest of mankind. And Bartleby's death elicits a cry of compassion from this man who had once grasped so little of the writer's problem. "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" are his (and Melville's) last words. They contain the final revelation. Such deeply felt and spontaneous sympathy is the nearest equivalent to the green of the grass within reach of man. It is an expression of human brotherhood as persistent, as magical as the leaves of grass. Charity is the force which may enable men to meet the challenge of death, whose many manifestations, real and imagined, annihilated the valiant Bartleby.

The final words of the fable are of a piece with Melville's undeviating aloofness from his hero: they at once acknowledge Bartleby's courage and repudiate his delusion. If such a man as the lawyer is ultimately capable of this discernment, then how wrong Bartleby was in permitting the wall to become the exclusive object of his concern! The lawyer can be saved. But the scrivener, like Ahab, or one of Hawthorne's genuises, has made the fatal error of turning his back on mankind. He has failed to see that there were in fact no impenetrable walls between the lawyer and himself. The only walls which had separated them were the folding (manipulatable) glass doors, and the green screen. Bartleby is wrong, but wrong or not, he is a hero; much as Ahab's mad quest was the necessary occasion for Ishmael's salvation, this writer's annihilation is the necessary occasion for Everyman's perception.

Among the countless imaginative statements of the artist's problems in modern literature, "Bartleby" is exceptional in its sympathy and hope for the average man, and in the severity of its treatment of the artist. This is particularly remarkable when we consider the seriousness of the rebuffs Melville had so recently been given by his contemporaries. But nothing, he is saying, may be allowed to relieve the writer of his obligations to mankind. If he forgets humanity, as Bartleby did, his art will die, and so will he. The lawyer, realizing this, at the last moment couples Bartleby's name with that of humanity itself. The fate of the artist is inseparable from that of all men. The eerie story of Bartleby is a compassionate rebuke to the self-absorption of the artist, and so a plea that he devote himself to keeping strong his bonds with the rest of mankind. Today, exactly a century after it was written, "Bartleby the Scrivener" is a counter-statement to the large and ever-growing canon of "ordealist" interpretations of the situation of the modern writer.

Criticism: H. Bruce Franklin (essay date 1963)

SOURCE: "Worldly Safety and Other-worldly Saviors," in *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology*, Stanford University Press, 1963, pp. 126-52.

[Franklin is an American critic with a special interest in the work of Herman Melville. In the following excerpt, he interprets "Bartleby, the Scrivener" as a religious allegory, particularly emphasizing Christian and Hindu motifs in the story.]

There are essentially three ethics available to man—action in and of the world, action in the world for other-worldly reasons, and nonaction, that is, withdrawal from the world. We might call the extreme of the first the ethic of Wall Street, the extreme of the second the ethic of Christ, and the extreme of the third the ethic of the Eastern monk. Wall Street's ethic seeks the world as an end; Christ's ethic prescribes certain behavior in this world to get to a better world; the Eastern monk's ethic seeks to escape all worlds. "Bartleby" is a world in which these three ethics directly confront one another.

To read "Bartleby" well, we must first realize that we can never know who or what Bartleby is, but that we are continually asked to guess who or what he might be. We must see that he may be anything from a mere bit of human flotsam to a conscious and forceful rejecter of the world to an incarnation of God. When we see the first possibility we realize the full pathos of the story; when we see the last possibility we realize that the story is a grotesque joke and a parabolic tragedy.

But of course the possibility that Bartleby may be the very least of men does not necessarily contradict the possibility that Bartleby may be an embodiment of God. For 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. Upon this identification depend the Christian ethic, the next world to which Christ sends every man, and the central meanings of "Bartleby":

34 Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

35 For I was ahungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

36 Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

37 Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee ahungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

38 When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

39 Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, 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.

41 Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

42 For I was ahungered, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:

43 I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

44 Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee ahungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

45 Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

Christ is here saying that the individual comes to God and attains his salvation when he shows complete charity to a stranger, and he rejects God and calls for his damnation whenever he refuses complete charity to *one* stranger, even "the least of these." As the story of *Bartleby* unfolds, it becomes increasingly apparent that it is in part a testing of this message of Christ. The narrator's soul depends from his actions toward Bartleby, a mysterious, poor, lonely, sick stranger who ends his life in prison. Can the narrator, the man of our world, act in terms of Christ's ethics? The answer is yes and no. The narrator fulfills the letter of Christ's injunction point by point: he offers money to the stranger so that he may eat and drink; he takes him in, finally offering him not only his office but also his home; when he sees that he is sick, he attempts to minister to him; he, alone of all mankind, visits and befriends the stranger in prison. But he hardly fulfills the spirit of Christ's message: his money is carefully doled out; he tries to evict the stranger, offers his home only after betraying him, and then immediately flees from him in the time of his greatest need; it is his demands on the stranger which have made him sick; he visits the stranger in prison only once while he is alive, thus leaving him alone for several days before and after his visit, thus leaving him to die entirely alone. At the heart of both the tragedy and the comedy lies the narrator's view of the drama, a view which sees all but all in the wrong terms: "To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange wilfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience."

According to Christ's words in Matthew 25, it would make no difference to the narrator's salvation whether Bartleby is the Saviour incarnate or merely the least of his brethren. And certainly reading "*Bartleby*" with Matthew 25 in mind defines the central issues, no matter who Bartleby is. But the story repeatedly suggests that Bartleby may not be merely the least of Christ's brethren but may in fact be the Saviour himself. Again I wish to emphasize that we are certainly not justified in simply taking Bartleby to be an incarnation or reincarnation of Christ (except in the terms of Matthew 25). But if we do not entertain the possibility that Bartleby is Christ, although we still see most of the tragedy, we miss a great deal of the comedy. Bartleby's story is the story of the advent, the betrayal, and torment of a mysterious and innocent being; this is a tragic story no matter who the being is. These events carefully and pointedly re-enact the story of Christ, and there is nothing funny about this. Nor is there anything inherently funny about the fact that for all we know Bartleby may be God incarnate. The central joke of the story is that although the narrator comes close to seeing this possibility without ever seeing what he sees, his language continually recognizes and defines the possibility that Bartleby may be Christ. The narrator's own words define his own tragedy as cosmic and comic.

The narrator tells us that he is an "eminently *safe* man," an "unambitious" lawyer who, "in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat," does "a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds." He tells of receiving the "good old office" of "Master in Chancery," which greatly enlarges his business. This is the time which he significantly labels "the period just preceding the advent of Bartleby." After mentioning this office only once, he digresses for several pages. When he next mentions it, he calls it simply—and significantly—"the master's office." This joke introduces the pointedly ambiguous description of the advent of Bartleby:

Now my original business. . . was considerably increased by receiving the master's office. There was now great work for scribes. Not only must I push the clerks already with me, but I must have additional help.

In answer to my advertisement, a motionless young man one morning stood upon my office threshold, the door being open, for it was summer. I can see that figure now—pallidly neat,

pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby.

So Bartleby is a being who answers the narrator's call for "additional help" at a time of "great work for scriveners." The narrator responds by placing "this quiet man within easy call, in case any trifling thing was to be done."

Bartleby at first does an "extraordinary" amount of work, but, "on the third day," begins to answer "I would prefer not to" to the narrator's petty orders. Who is this being? The narrator can only tell us that "Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and, in his case, those are very small."

As Bartleby, by merely standing, sitting, and lying still, step by step withdraws from the world, the narrator follows him, leaving behind, bit by bit, his worldly values. Slowly the narrator's compassion for Bartleby and his sense of brotherhood with him emerge, and as they emerge we see more and more clearly that the drama involves the salvation of both Bartleby—the poor, lonely stranger—and the narrator—the "safe" man who in many ways represents our world. As this drama becomes clear, the narrator's language becomes more and more grotesquely ironic.

At the beginning of his withdrawal, Bartleby is only saved from being "violently dismissed" because the narrator cannot find "anything ordinarily human about him." In the next stage of his withdrawal, Bartleby stands at the entrance of his "hermitage" and "mildly" asks "What is wanted?" when the narrator "hurriedly" demands that he proofread the copies, Bartleby answers that he "would prefer not to," and the narrator tells us that "for a few moments I was turned into a pillar of salt."

The narrator, as boss of the office, plays god. What he does not realize, but what his language makes clear, is that he may be playing this role with God himself. The narrator tells us that he "again advanced towards Bartleby" because "I felt additional incentives tempting me to my fate." "Sometimes, to be sure, I could not, for the very soul of me," he ironically admits, "avoid falling into sudden spasmodic passions with him."

The narrator even discovers "something superstitious knocking at my heart, and forbidding me to carry out my purpose . . . if I dared to breathe one bitter word against this forlornest of mankind." At this point we need hardly remember Matthew 25 or that Melville referred to Christ as the Man of Sorrows to see why the narrator should look to his salvation instead of his safety. But when the narrator surmises that Bartleby has "nothing else earthly to do," he blandly asks him to carry some letters to the post office.

The narrator then realizes that Bartleby is "absolutely alone in the universe," but his response to this cosmic loneliness is to tell Bartleby that "in six days' time he must unconditionally leave the office." On the appointed day, the narrator tries to dismiss Bartleby with words that become grotesquely ludicrous if they are seen as an inversion of the true roles of these two beings: "If, hereafter, in your new place of abode, I can be of any service to you, do not fail to advise me by letter." Perhaps the narrator has already received in very clear letters all the advice he needs, a description of what service Bartleby might be to him in his new place of abode, and what his own place of abode will be if he rejects the advice and denies the man. (But perhaps, as the last few paragraphs of the story hint, Matthew 25 and its entire context is now the Dead Letter Office.)

Shortly after saying these words, the narrator discovers that this very day is "an election day." Still, "a sudden passion"—the very thing which the narrator's words had recognized as endangering his "very soul"—makes him demand that Bartleby leave him. The scrivener gently replies, "I would prefer *not* to quit you." The narrator reminds Bartleby ironically that he has no "earthly right" to stay; Bartleby "answered nothing" and "silently retired into his hermitage."

This infuriates the narrator; as he says, the "old Adam of resentment rose in me and tempted me concerning Bartleby." But on this election day the narrator saves himself for the time being "simply by recalling the divine injunction: 'A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.'" "Yes," he says, "this it was that saved me." But the narrator fails to grasp what he has seen; he defines this love "as a vastly wise and prudent principle"; "mere self-interest" becomes his most clearly perceived motive to "charity."

After some day pass in which he has had a chance to consult "Edwards on the Will" and "Priestley on Necessity," the narrator has his most complete revelation of his own drama:

Gradually I slid into the persuasion that these troubles of mine, touching the scrivener, had been all predestinated from eternity, and Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like me to fathom. Yes, Bartleby, stay there behind your screen, thought I; I shall persecute you no more; you are harmless and noiseless as any of these old chairs; in short, I never feel so private as when I know you are here. At last I see it, I feel it; I penetrate to the predestinated purpose of my life. I am content. Others may have loftier parts to enact; but my mission in this world, Bartleby, is to furnish you with office-room for such period as you may see fit to remain.

According to Christ's own words in Matthew 25, the narrator is absolutely right; he has finally seen his mission in the world.

But the narrator's resolution of his dilemma is short-lived. It withers quickly under the "uncharitable remarks obtruded upon" him by his "professional friends." He confesses that the whispers of his professional acquaintance "worried me very much." When he then thinks of the possibility of Bartleby's "denying my authority," outliving him, and claiming "possession of my office by right of his perpetual occupancy," the narrator resolves to "forever rid me of this intolerable incubus." Even then, after he informs Bartleby that he must leave, and after Bartleby takes "three days to meditate upon it," he learns that Bartleby "still preferred to abide with" him, that "he prefers to cling to" him. This sets the stage for the narrator's denial of Bartleby, for he decides that "since he will not quit me, I must quit him."

To hear the full significance of his three denials of Bartleby, we must hear the loud echoes of Peter's three denials of Christ. Matthew 26:

70 But he denied before them all, saying, I know not what thou sayest.

72 And again he denied with an oath, I do not know the man.

74 Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man.

Even closer are Peter's words in Mark 14:71: "I know not this man of whom ye speak."

The first denial:

"Then, sir," said the stranger, who proved a lawyer, "you are responsible for the man you left there." . . .

"I am very sorry, sir," said I, with assumed tranquillity, but an inward tremor, "but, really, the man you allude to is nothing to me."

The second denial:

"In mercy's name, who is he?"

"I certainly cannot inform you. I know nothing about him."

The third denial:

In vain I persisted that Bartleby was nothing to me—no more than to any one else.

After the narrator's three denials of Bartleby, he belatedly makes his most charitable gesture toward him, offering, "in the kindest tone I could assume under such exciting circumstances," to permit him to come to his home. But Bartleby answers, "No: at present I would prefer not to make any change at all." The narrator leaves; the new landlord has the police remove Bartleby to the Tombs. The narrator then learns of Bartleby's procession to his Golgotha:

As I afterwards learned, the poor scrivener, when told that he must be conducted to the Tombs, offered not the slightest obstacle, but, in his pale, unmoving way, silently acquiesced.

Some of the compassionate and curious bystanders joined the party; and headed by one of the constables arm in arm with Bartleby, the silent procession filed its way through all the noise, and heat, and joy of the roaring thoroughfares at noon.

"Quite serene and harmless in all his ways," Bartleby is, like Christ, "numbered with the transgressors" (Mark 15:28). The world places him in prison where, amidst "murderers and thieves," he completes his withdrawal from the world.

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. Before Bartleby leaves the world he says to the narrator, "I know you," and adds, without looking at him, "and I want nothing to say to you." At this point we can hear new ironies in the narrator's attempt to dismiss Bartleby: "If, hereafter, in your new place of abode, I can be of any service to you, do not fail to advise me by letter." Thus, when the narrator retells the rumor of Bartleby's having worked in the Dead Letter Office, he describes in part himself, in part Bartleby, and in part the scriptural letters which spell the hope of salvation. "The master's office" has become the Dead Letter Office.

Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? . . . pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.

Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!

But all this is only half the story. For if the narrator is weighed and found wanting, what then of Bartleby himself? At least the narrator at times can show compassion, sympathy, and charity. Indeed, he at times much more than transcends the worldly ethics with which he starts and to which he tends to backslide. (One must bear in mind while evaluating the narrator's behavior that he is continually defending himself from two possible accusations—that he is too hard-hearted and that he is too softhearted.) Although he begins by strictly following horological time, he conforms more and more closely to chronometrical time. And he is after all certainly the most charitable character in the story. What time does Bartleby follow, and, finally, how charitable is he? Or is it possible to account for the actions of a being who is almost by definition enigmatic?

Because "Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and, in his case, those are very small," he is almost as difficult to judge as to identify. But whether he

is finally a god incarnate as a man or only a man playing the role of a crucified god, his behavior fits a pattern which implies an ethic.

If, as the Plotinus Plinlimmon pamphlet asserts in *Pierre*, chronometrical time is an impossibility for man, if man is left with the choice in the world between following chronometrical time and being destroyed or following horological time and being contemptible, if, then, no action in the world can be at the same time safe and worthy of salvation, what is there left for man to do? One answer is that man can try to live out of the world, can withdraw from the world altogether. This is the answer which forms the counterpoint with worldly ethics in both "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno," each of which dramatizes a particular and different kind of monasticism.

Bartleby's monkish withdrawal from the world has been described by Saburo Yamaya [in *Studies in English Literature* XXXIV, 1957] and Walter Sutton [in *Prairie Schooner* XXXIV, 1960] as essentially Buddhistic in nature. Yamaya shows the connections between Buddhist Quietism and the stone imagery of both *Pierre* and "Bartleby," citing as one of Melville's sources this passage from Bayle's *Dictionary*:

The great lords and the most illustrious persons suffered themselves to be so infatuated with the [Buddhist] Quietism, that they believed insensibility to be the way to perfection and beatitude and that the nearer a man came to the nature of a block or *a stone*, the greater progress he made, the more he was like the first principle, into which he was to return.

Sutton quite accurately perceives (apparently without reference to Yamaya) that Bartleby, in achieving "the complete withdrawal of the hunger artist," has attained what "in Buddhist terms . . . is Nirvana, extinction, or nothingness," and he suggests that at this point in his life Melville was unconsciously approaching Buddhism. But Melville was probably quite aware that Bartleby's behavior conforms very closely to a kind of Oriental asceticism which Thomas Maurice had spent about fifty pages describing.

The Oriental ascetic who most closely resembles Bartleby is the Saniassi, a Hindu rather than a Buddhist. It seems probable that once again Maurice's *Indian Antiquities* served as a direct source for Melville's fiction. Maurice describes in detail the systematic withdrawal from the world practiced by the Saniassi, and many details have a surprising—and grotesquely humorous—correspondence to the systematic withdrawal from the world practiced by Bartleby. For instance, in the fifth stage the Saniassi "eats only one particular kind of food during the day and night, but as often as he pleases." Bartleby "lives, then, on ginger-nuts. . . never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian, then, but no; he never eats even vegetables, he eats nothing but ginger-nuts." "During the last three days," the Saniassi "neither eats nor drinks." During Bartleby's last few days, he prefers not to eat.

The fact that external details of Bartleby's withdrawal closely parallel some of the external details of the Saniassi's withdrawal is not nearly so significant as this fact: Bartleby's behavior seems to be the very essence of Maurice's description of the Saniassi's behavior. In fact, Maurice's general description and judgment of the Saniassi often seems to be a precise description and judgment of Bartleby.

Most striking are the very things which Maurice claims are peculiar to the Saniassi. He observes that one of the principal ways in which the Saniassi is distinguished from the Yogi is "by the calm, the silent, dignity with which he suffers the series of complicated evils through which he is ordained to toil." The Saniassi "can only be fed by the charity of others"; "he must himself make no exertion, nor feel any solicitude for existence upon this contaminated orb." The Saniassis' design "is to detach their thoughts from all concern about sublunary objects; to be indifferent to hunger and thirst; to be insensible to shame and reproach."

Perhaps most important to the judgment of Bartleby is the Saniassis' "incessant efforts . . . to stifle every ebullition of human passion, and live upon earth as if they were already, and in reality, disembodied." This

may at once help account for Bartleby's appearing as a "ghost" or as "cadaverous" to the narrator and explain what ethical time he follows, for "it is the boast of the Saniassi to sacrifice every human feeling and passion at the shrine of devotion." Like Bartleby, the Saniassi "is no more to be soothed by the suggestions of *adulation* in its most pleasing form, than he is to be terrified by the loudest clamours of *reproach*. . . By long habits of indifference, he becomes inanimate as a piece of wood or stone; and, though he mechanically respire the vital air, he is to all the purposes of active life *defunct*."

"Bartleby" is, then, in part the story of a man of the world who receives "the master's office"; who advertises for help; who is thereupon visited by a stranger being who in an "extraordinary" way at first does all that is asked of him; who treats this strange being with contempt; who nevertheless receives from this being what seems to be his purpose in life; who betrays this being; and who watches and describes the systematic withdrawal of this being. It is also in part the story of this strange being, who replays much of the role of Christ while behaving like an Hindu ascetic, and who ends by extinguishing himself and making dead letters of the scripture which describes his proto-type.

Criticism: John Gardner (essay date 1964)

SOURCE: "'Bartleby': Art and Social Commitment," in *Philological Quarterly*, Vol. XLIII, No. 1, January, 1964, pp. 87-98.

[Gardner was an American novelist, educator, and critic with a special interest in medieval literature. As a critic, he championed the moral function of literature. In the following essay, he analyzes the relationship of the individual to society as portrayed in "Bartleby, the Scrivener."]

In "Bartleby," man looks at man, artist looks at artist, and God looks at God. To understand that the narrator is at least as right as Bartleby, both on the surface and on symbolic levels, is to understand the remarkable interpenetration of form and content in the story. Most Melville readers have noticed that on one level, Bartleby can represent the honest artist: he is a "scrivener" who refuses to "copy," as Melville himself refused to copy—that is, as he refused to knock out more saleable South Seas romances. But if Bartleby is the artist, he is the artist manqué: his is a vision not of life but of death; "the man of silence," he creates nothing. A better kind of artist is the lawyer, who, having seen reality through Bartleby's eyes, has turned to literature. Nor is he the slick writer: "If I pleased," he says, "[I] could relate divers histories, at which goodnatured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep." That is, popular fiction. The phrase "If I pleased" is significant: "please" is the narrator's substitution, later, for Bartleby's infectious "prefer." Like Bartleby, the narrator does what he prefers to do—but within certain reasonable limits. The reader may smile or weep at Bartleby's story, but the narrator's chief reason for choosing it is that he is seriously concerned with "literature." Close reading reveals that the story he tells is indeed a highly organized literary work, a story that is as much the narrator's as it is Bartleby's, ending with the narrator's achievement of that depth of understanding necessary to the telling of the story.

An important part of what the narrator at last understands is the conflict between the individual and society. The individual feels certain preferences which, taken together, establish his personal identity; society makes simultaneously necessary and unreasonable demands which modify individual identity. Thus the individual's view of himself and the view others have of him can become two quite different things separated by a substantial wall (communication is difficult); thus, too, the socialized man's identity and his view of his identity can be walled apart (self-knowledge is difficult). And man's dilemma cannot be resolved, for if one insists on one's own preferences and thereby affirms one's identity, one finds oneself, like Bartleby, walled off from society and communion with other men; and on the other hand, if one gives in to the necessary laws of social action, one finds oneself, like Bartleby's employer, walled off from active obedience to the higher laws of self and, in a sense, reality. Wall Street is the prison in which all men live.

The conflict between the rule of individual preference and the necessary laws of social action takes various forms in "Bartleby." Conflicts arise between individual and social impulses within each of the first three scriveners, Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut, and also between individual traits in the scriveners and the necessary requirements of their employer, whose commitment is perforce social, for he must do his job well to survive. But for the action of the story, the most important conflicts are those rooted in the relationship of the lawyer and Bartleby, that is, the conflicts between employer and employee, between the lawyer's kindly nature and his recognition of the reasonableness of society's harsh demands, and between Bartleby and the world.

In many ways the lawyer and Bartleby differ. The lawyer is a successful, essentially practical man with highly developed feelings for social position (he mentions coyly that he was "not unemployed" by John Jacob Astor), the value of money (the office of Master in Chancery is "pleasantly remunerative"), "common usage and common sense," and above all, as he tells us John Jacob Astor has observed, "prudence" and "method." Bartleby, on the other hand, is merely a clerk with an obscure past, a man little concerned with practicality in the ordinary sense, and apparently quite uninterested in social position, money, or usage and sense. He is totally lacking in prudence—he courts dismissal at every turn—and for method he relies upon "preference," often preference "at present." The narrator at first cannot understand Bartleby, for good reason, and Bartleby prefers not to understand the narrator or the society the narrator represents. At the same time, the two characters are in some respects similar. Early in the story the narrator tells us, "I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best"; and Bartleby shares the narrator's profound conviction: what he cannot share is the narrator's opinion that the easiest way must be socially acceptable, or even "reasonable." The narrator is also like Bartleby in that he does not seek "public applause"; but Bartleby goes further, he does not avoid public censure. Finally, the narrator is decorous and "eminently *safe*"; so is Bartleby: the narrator is positive that Bartleby would not copy in shirtsleeves or on Sunday, and the narrator has "singular confidence in his honesty."

Perhaps partly because the narrator and Bartleby are both different and similar, the conflict between them triggers a conflict within the narrator's mind. He knows that as employer he has the authority to make demands of a scrivener, whatever the scrivener's preference, for if employers cannot function as employers, society cannot work; but despite his knowledge, the narrator cannot bring himself to force Bartleby to obey or get out. When Bartleby first refuses to comply with a request, the narrator merely thinks, "This is very strange. . . . What had one best do?" and, being pressed by business, goes on with his work. When Bartleby refuses to comply with another request, the narrator is shaken and for a moment doubts the assumption behind employer-employee relations. When Bartleby uses it as a *modus operandi*, the narrator's opinion that "the easiest way of life is the best" conflicts with his equally firm opinion that the laws of social action are of necessity right; and in his momentary uncertainty the narrator turns to his office, a miniature society, for a ruling. Even their ruling is not much help, however, for to act on it would be to become involved in unpleasantness, and this the narrator would prefer to avoid in favor of some easier way—if any is to be found. Once again he avoids the issue, in the socially approved way, by turning his mind to his work.

Bartleby's unconventional insistence on his preferences, and his indifference to the demands of his social setting, the office, leads the narrator to wonder about him, that is, to want to understand him. He watches Bartleby narrowly and finds him more enigmatic than before. Bartleby never seems to leave, he exists on ginger nuts, and in the miniature society of the office his corner remains a "hermitage." Judgment cannot account for the man, and though imagination provides "delicious self-approval," it too fails to provide understanding. The conflict in the narrator's mind between acceptance of Bartleby as enigmatic eccentric, on one hand, and insistence on Bartleby's position as employee, on the other, leads to no action while the narrator is in a charitable mood; but when he is not, he feels a need to force Bartleby into revealing himself actively, not just passively—that is, to make himself vulnerable by showing "some angry spark answerable to my own." The narrator's goading excites the other scriveners, but it cannot reach Bartleby. At last, for the sake of keeping peace in the office, and also because some of Bartleby's preferences coincide with the preferences of

society ("his steadiness, his freedom from all dissipation, his incessant industry"), the narrator comes to accept Bartleby, and the narrator's internal conflict is temporarily resolved.

When the narrator learns that Bartleby lives at the office, the internal conflict reawakens. As he looks through Bartleby's things, the narrator's judgment hurls him onto the truth: Bartleby is "the victim of innate and incurable disorder," in a word, he is mad. Common sense demands that he be gotten rid of, for, as the narrator sees, the practical fact is that "pity is not seldom pain," and one cannot work well (as one must in this world) when one is suffering. The narrator gives his scrivener one last chance: he asks Bartleby to tell him about his past; if Bartleby will answer like a sensible man, the narrator will keep him on. As he asks it, the narrator insists, sincerely enough, "I feel friendly towards you." And the effect is interesting: Bartleby hesitates "a considerable time" before answering, and for the first time his composure breaks—his lips tremble. "*At present*," he says (and he is using the phrase "at present" for the first time), "I prefer to give no answer." It seems that the narrator has cracked the wall between them; but if so, he does not know it at the time. The narrator's common sense goes deep and now, when he is on the threshold of his scrivener's secret self, self-delusion saves the narrator from what, as he rightly sees, cannot help Bartleby and can only hurt himself. Misinterpreting what has happened, he feels "nettled" and says, "Not only did there seem to lurk in [Bartleby's manner] a certain calm disdain, but his perverseness seemed ungrateful, considering the undeniable good usage and indulgence he had received from me." Even so, common sense is not quite triumphant: "I strangely felt something superstitious knocking at my heart, and forbidding me to carry out my purpose [of firing Bartleby], and denouncing me for a villain if I dared to breathe one bitter word against this forlornest of mankind." Instead of sensibly dismissing the mad scrivener, the narrator chooses mercy, not justice, and humbly begs Bartleby to promise to be a little reasonable "in a day or two." Bartleby's answer, of course, is as delightfully mad as the request: "At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable." And Bartleby, or the will of the individual, wins. Indeed, individualism is doing very well: Everyone in the office is saying "prefer" these days. Social dicta become polite suggestions waiting upon the individual's taste ("If [Bartleby] would but prefer to take a quart of good ale every day . . ."); legal etiquette becomes a matter of individual choice (the narrator is asked what color paper he prefers for a certain document). Bartleby's success is complete when, preferring to do no more copying, and preferring to remain in the office, he gets the narrator to prefer to put up with him.

In voluntarily choosing to accept Bartleby as "the predestined purpose of my life," the narrator makes a choice which, unfortunately, he is not free to make. From the point of view of society, the choice is odd, unacceptable (like Colt's choice to murder Adams—a choice Colt would not have made, the narrator says, if the two of them had not been alone). Bartleby is such an oddity in the office that at last the narrator must choose between Bartleby and his own professional reputation. As the sane man must, the narrator chooses society and denies Bartleby: he moves out of the office. When moving out proves insufficient—for society holds him accountable—the narrator reluctantly goes the whole route: he would not have acted with the cruel common sense of the landlord, but preferring to choose the inevitable, he gives the testimony requested in the landlord's note. The betrayed Bartleby pronounces the judgment: "I know you." Even now the narrator feels friendly towards Bartleby, and certainly he cannot be blamed for his action; nevertheless, betrayal is betrayal, and both of them know it.

The sequel provides us with an insight into the background of Bartleby's derangement and provides the narrator with belated understanding of his scrivener. As the narrator understands the matter, and we have no reason to doubt his interpretation, Bartleby's former occupation as dead-letter clerk heightened the natural pallid hopelessness of Bartleby's character by giving him a queer and terrible vision of life. The narrator thinks, as Bartleby must have thought before him, "Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?" Letters sent on missions of pardon, hope, good tidings—errands of life—end in pointless flames; and the dead-letter clerk sees no other kind of mail (if, in fact, there is any other kind). What he knows about letters he comes to know of man. The bustle of activity, scrivening, clerking, bar-tending, bill-collecting, traveling—all tumble at last against the solid wall, death. Bartleby prefers not to share the delusions of society. For him, the easiest

way of life is the best because whether one spends one's time "not unemployed" by John Jacob Astor or spends it "sitting upon a banister," one dies. He is not "lunatic," as Ginger-Nut thinks, but mad. Estranged from the ordinary view of life (he does not even read the papers), Bartleby perceives reality; thus whereas the narrator, when he looks out his windows, sees at one end a wall "deficient in what landscape painters call 'life'" and at the other end "a huge, square cistern" Bartleby sees, respectively, death and the grave.

Except at the moment when he is tempted to feel affection for the man who feels friendly towards him, there is within Bartleby no conflict at all. He is dead already, as the narrator's recurring adjective, "cadaverous," suggests. Whatever the exigencies of the moment, he cannot be made to forget the walls enclosing life. He has walked for some time in the yard "not accessible to common prisoners," for the yard in the Tombs is life itself: "The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighted upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung." But though Bartleby suffers no conflict within, he is engaged in a conflict more basic than that in which the narrator is involved. The narrator wishes to avoid unpleasantness—and if possible, to do so without loss of self-respect. Bartleby wishes to shape his own destiny, at least within the little space between the walls of birth and death. The narrator, when he has "looked a little into 'Edwards on the Will,' and 'Priestley on Necessity,'" slides into the persuasion that his troubles have been predestined from eternity, and he chooses to accept them, voluntarily relinquishing his will to "an allwise Providence." But Bartleby insists on freedom. When the narrator suggests that he take a clerkship in a dry-goods store, he answers, "There is too much confinement about that." The narrator's reaction: "why, you keep yourself confined all the time!" misses the point, for confinement, if one chooses confinement, is free agency, and circling the world, if required of one, is not. Melville makes the point dramatically. When Bartleby will neither tour Europe with some young man nor live in the narrator's home, the narrator flees from Bartleby, the landlord and the tenants who may again besiege the law office. He runs from the building, up Wall Street toward Broadway, catches a bus, surrenders his business to Nippers, and turns to still wilder flight, driving about in his rockaway for days. In his restless flight he is less free than the man on the banister.

But in the end, no individual, not even Bartleby, can be free. The freedom of each individual curtails the freedom of some other, as poor Colt's freedom curtails the freedom of Adams (murdered men have no preferences), and as Bartleby's freedom curtails that of the narrator. Thus the limits imposed upon freedom by the laws of Nature are narrowed by the laws of society: Bartleby must be jailed. Inside the prison, "individuals"; outside, "functionaries." Betrayed by the narrator and the society he represents, confined in a smaller prison and, as he says, knowing where he is, Bartleby has only one freedom left: he may prefer not to live. And he does.

Melville suggests in various ways that the conflict between Bartleby and the world (and the conflict within the narrator's mind) is one between imagination and judgment, or reason. Judgment supports society: ethical law is the law of reason: imagination, on the other hand, supports higher values, those central to poetry and religion: moral law is the law of imagination. Ethical law, always prohibitive, guarantees equal rights to all members of the group, but moral law, always affirmative, points to the absolute, without respect to the needs of the group. Thus ethical law demands that scribes proofread their copy; but the narrator says, "I cannot credit that the mettlesome poet, Byron, would have contentedly sat down with Bartleby to examine a law document of, say five hundred pages. . . ." And when the narrator sees that Bartleby is mad and must be dismissed, that is, when common sense bids the narrator's soul be rid of the man, the narrator cannot bring himself to go to Trinity Church. Reason and imagination also divide the narrator's mind: each time Bartleby's stubborn preferences force the narrator into thought, the narrator thinks in two ways, by imagination (when he sees in poetic or religious terms) and by reason (when he works out logical deductions after studying facts); and the results of the two ways of thinking differ sharply. Reason tells the narrator that Bartleby exists on ginger-nuts but somehow does not become hot and spicy; "imagination," explaining "what proves impossible to be solved by . . . judgment," tells the narrator that Bartleby is a "poor fellow" who "means no mischief" and

"intends no insolence." When the narrator examines Bartleby's belongings, imagination leads him close to an understanding of Bartleby the individual: as he detects, through empathy, the loneliness of Bartleby, he sees that he and Bartleby are "both sons of Adam," and he begins to suffer "sad fancyings—the chimeras, doubtless, of a sick and silly brain." He adds, "Presentiments of strange discoveries hovered round me. The scrivener's pale form appeared to me laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding sheet." Reason, however, leads the narrator in a different direction. He sees that the man is mad (a social judgment) and that, after giving Bartleby a fair chance to prove himself sane, he must fire him. Throughout the story, the narrator's generous impulses, as well as his attempts at self-justification when common sense fails to drive out the sense of guilt, take religious form: by leaps of faith, or imagination, he understands Bartleby, and when he is considering doing harm to Bartleby for the sake of his own reputation, he consoles himself with words like "charity" and "love," allowing himself to believe that what he plans is after all for Bartleby's good, not his own. (The narrator is self-deluded, not hypocritical, for as he tells the story now he understands and, usually, acknowledges the mistakes he made at the time of his Bartleby troubles. Mistakes he does not acknowledge openly he treats in comic terms, as he treats his ethical perversion of the moral injunction "that ye love one another.")

If the narrator's interpretation of Bartleby's madness is correct, imagination, presenting a metaphor which relates dead letters and men, is the basis of Bartleby's plight. In other words, he is a man who has seen a vision and, holding true to his vision, can no longer operate in the ordinary world. In a sense, he is a queer sort of fanatic, operating on the basis of a religion of his own.

Obviously the conflicts in "Bartleby," together with the germs of symbolic extension of meaning, are rooted in character; and the legitimacy of the conflicts, whether they are seen as conflicts between the individual and society or between will and necessity, is equally clear. Thus the story is not a melodrama (between, say, the stupid reviewer of *Pierre* and the pure, heroic author) but an honest fictional representation of a dilemma which, in ordinary life, cannot be resolved. In the end the narrator understands. Learning that Bartleby was a dead-letter clerk, he achieves Bartleby's vision: he sees by a leap of imagination exactly what Bartleby must have seen—dead letters, dead men, limited human freedom. This vision is the terrible outcome foreshadowed earlier: "And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further and deeper aberration might it not yet produce?" From the beginning the narrator has been imaginative—in fact, like Bartleby, has been given to "fancyings" and "chimeras"; but unlike Bartleby, he also possesses judgment. When he needs to, he can control his fancies. Unlike Bartleby, he creates: he originally created his practice, he has created "recondite documents," and he is now creating a work of art. Reason must impose order upon the chaos of imagination.

Symbolism in "Bartleby" supports this view of scrivener as visionary and narrator as creator. The religion of ordinary scriveners is the routine of the law office or the will of the lawyer: the narrator speaks of Turkey as the "most reverential of men," values his "morning services," and cannot get him to give up his afternoon "devotions"; and the narrator tells us that Turkey eats ginger-nuts as though they were "wafers." Bartleby is another matter: his arrival is an "advent," there is nothing "ordinarily human about him," he is full of "quiet mysteries," and when the narrator leaves Bartleby alone in the office Bartleby stands "like the last pillar of a ruined temple." He dies at last among "murderers and thieves." And whereas Bartleby is Christ-like, the narrator is Jehovah-like: the voice behind the story, like the voice behind *The Confidence Man*, is mythical, for the speaker here is God, the story that of his reluctant change from the legalistic, tribal deity of the Old Testament to the God of Love and Justice in the New Testament. As Melville treats the material, Christ is not a son of God but (as the Old Testament Jehovah sees him) an "incubus," thus not a revelation sent by God to man but rather a nightmare creature who drives God into self-knowledge (as, on the literal level, Bartleby drives the lawyer to self-knowledge).

The narrator and Jehovah are linked in numerous ways. The narrator is officially "Master" in Chancery. Like Jehovah, he keeps out of the public eye and works "in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat." The narrator's

first scrivener, Turkey, is the militant archangel Michael. His nickname is possibly meant to suggest not only the rednecked, irascible fowl emblematic of thanksgiving but also the terrible Turk. He has a face which "beams," "blazes," and "flames" like the sun, and he considers himself, rather insolently, the narrator's "right hand man." He uses his ruler as a sword and is in charge of the narrator's forces, marshalling and deploying "columns" (the narrator speaks later of his "column of clerks"), and charging "the foe." His "inflamed" ways are always "worse on Saturdays" (the Sabbath). The second scrivener, Nippers (pincers), is symbolically linked with Lucifer. He is a "whiskered, sallow, and, upon the whole, piratical-looking young man" who suffers from "ambition" as well as indigestion. He is impatient with the duties of a mere copyist, and his ambition is evinced by "an unwarrantable usurpation of strictly professional affairs, such as the original drawing up of legal documents." (The Devil is famous for making pacts: consider poor Faust.) His indigestion (spleen) is "betokened in an occasional nervous testiness and grinning irritability, causing the teeth to audibly grind together . . . , unnecessary maledictions, hissed, rather than spoken, in the heat [inferno] of business. . . ." He has his own kingdom, for the narrator says, "Among the manifestations of his diseased ambition was a fondness he had for receiving visits from certain ambiguous-looking fellows in seedy coats, whom he called his clients." He is "considerable of a ward-politician," occasionally does "a little business at the Justices' courts," and is "not unknown on the steps of the Tombs." As gods and would-be gods control willful men, so Nippers jerks his desk about as if it were "a perverse voluntary agent and vexing him." The third scrivener, Ginger Nut (Raphael, perhaps)—for Milton the messenger and sociable angel is official cake (or "wafer") and apple (forbidden fruit?) purveyor for the establishment.

Much of the humor in *Bartleby* depends upon the reader's perceiving the symbolic level, for comic effect arises out of the tendency of surface and symbolic levels to infect one another: the narrator, an ordinary man, is comic when he behaves like God, and God is comic when he behaves like man; and other tensions between surface and symbol (Turkey—Michael, Nippers—Lucifer) work in the same way. Ground glass folding doors (through which, presumably, we see darkly) divide the narrator's premises into two parts. "According to my humor," the narrator says, rather pleased with himself, "I threw open these doors, or closed them." He also takes pleasure in his clever disposition of Bartleby: Bartleby sits inside the doors (all others are outside) but sits behind a screen "which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice." Puns frequently contribute to this humor. The words "original" and "genius" work as they do in *The Confidence Man*. And when the narrator becomes resigned to Bartleby he says, "One prime thing was this—*he was always there*. . ." (Melville's italics). When the scrivener's being "always there" proves a not unmixed blessing, the narrator says:

And as the idea came upon me of his possibly turning out a long lived man, and keep occupying my chambers, and denying my authority; and perplexing my visitors; and scandalizing my professional reputation; and casting a general gloom over the premises; keeping soul and body together to the last upon his savings (for doubtless he spent but half a dime a day), and in the end perhaps outlive me, and claim possession of my office by right of his perpetual occupancy... I resolved to gather all my faculties together, and forever rid me of this intolerable incubus.

Ere revolving any complicated project, however, adapted to this end, I first simply suggested to Bartleby the propriety of his permanent departure. . . . But having taken three days to meditate upon it, he apprised me, that his original determination remained the same; in short, that he still preferred to abide with me.

(The funniest barrage of puns in the story is *keeping soul and body together to the last upon his savings*.) But the effect of the symbolic level is not always—and is never entirely—comic. When the narrator abandons his office to Nippers at the time of Bartleby's arrest, one is more distressed than amused. One is moved, too, by the rich final line of the story: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" A man who behaves like God may be queerly admirable. The narrator puffs up his chest like God, but he is also capable of infinite compassion, he is

dedicated to the spirit of the law (he will not get rid of Bartleby by laying an essentially false charge on him), and he can survive.

The lawyer-turned-artist is creative, like God, because he has judgment. He has imagination like "the mettlesome poet Byron," but unlike Byron (Melville seems to suggest) the lawyer has the judgment to see that the commitment of art is to man. One reason for the social commitment of art, as we have seen, is that society cannot operate without voluntary or involuntary diminution of the individual will. But Melville offers, in "Bartleby," another reason as well. The final line of the story is both an equation and an opposition: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" Man lives on a walled-up street where the practice of law flourishes and justice is operative only in the mind. If justice is to be introduced into the ordinary world, if man is to receive recompense for being stopped in mid-action by dry lightning (like the narrator's man from Virginia), justice must come either as a Christian afterlife or as a transmutation of purely conceptual experience—that is, as art. The first seems no longer certain: the office of Master in Chancery is now defunct, "a [damned] premature act." We must find some other pleasant remuneration. The betrayed Bartleby gets justice and mercy at last, though; for Bartleby, whose freedom was limited in life by the inescapability of death, is now transmogrified to eternal life in art. Before Bartleby, the office was governed by law; but the recondite document at hand is a New Testament of sorts, at once ethical and moral. It insists upon law in this world, but it also provides justice. Though life must of necessity be characterized by limited freedom, voluntary self-diminution, there will be, after life, art. The artist rolls the stone away—that is the narrator's creative act—and man escapes from the Tombs.

Criticism: Lionel Trilling (essay date 1967)

SOURCE: "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street," in *Prefaces to The Experience of Literature*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979, pp. 74-8.

[A respected American critic and literary historian, Trilling was also an essayist, editor, novelist, and short story writer. His exploration of liberal arts theory and its implications for the conduct of life led Trilling to function not only as a literary critic, but also as a social commentator. In the following essay, which originally appeared in *The Experience of Literature* (1967), he describes *Bartleby* as an individual alienated by the capitalist spirit.]

In a letter he wrote to Hawthorne in 1851, Melville, speaking of his friend in the third person, offered him this praise: "There is the grand truth about Nathaniel Hawthorne. He says NO! in thunder; but the Devil himself cannot make him say *yes*. For all men who say *yes*, lie. . . ." Melville was referring to Hawthorne's relation to the moral order of the universe as it is conventionally imagined, but his statement, which has become famous, is often read as Melville's own call to resist the conformity that society seeks to impose. It was taken in this way by one of the notable students of Melville, Richard Chase, who quotes it at the beginning of an account of Melville's attitude toward the American life of his time and goes on to say that "although Melville was not exclusively a nay-sayer, his experiences and his reflections upon the quality of American civilization had taught him to utter the powerful 'no' he attributes to Hawthorne. He learned to say 'no' to the boundlessly optimistic commercialized creed of most Americans, with its superficial and mean conception of the possibilities of human life, its denial of all the genuinely creative or heroic capacities of man, and its fear and dislike of any but the mildest truths. Melville's 'no' finds expression in the tragic-comic tale of 'Bartleby the Scrivener'" ["Herman Melville" in *Major Writers of America*, edited by Perry Miller, Vol. I].

But although this great story tells of a nay-saying of a quite ultimate kind, perhaps the first thing we notice about Bartleby's "no" is how far it is from being uttered "in thunder." And exactly its distance from thunder makes the negation as momentous as it is; the contrast between the extent of Bartleby's refusal and the minimal way in which he expresses it accounts for the story's strange force, its mythic impressiveness.

Whether he is being asked to accommodate himself to the routine of his job in the law office or to the simplest requirements of life itself, Bartleby makes the same answer, "I prefer not to"—the phrase is prism, genteel, rather finicking; the negative volition it expresses seems to be of a very low intensity. Melville is at pains to point up the odd inadequacy of that word *prefer* by the passage in which he tells how it was unconsciously adopted into the speech of the narrator and his office staff, and with what comic effect.

Actually, of course, the small, muted phrase that Bartleby chooses for his negation is the measure of his intransigence. A "NO! in thunder" implies that the person who utters it is involved with and has strong feelings about whatever it is that he rejects or opposes. The louder his thunder, the greater is his (and our) belief in the power, the interest, the real existence of what he negates. Bartleby's colorless formula of refusal has the opposite effect—in refusing to display articulate anger against the social order he rejects, our poor taciturn nay-sayer denies its interest and any claim it may have on his attention and reason. "I prefer not to" implies that reason is not in point; the choice that is being made does not need the substantiation of reason: it is, as it were, a matter of "taste," even of whim, an act of pure volition, having reference to nothing but the nature of the agent. Or the muted minimal phrase might be read as an expression of the extremest possible arrogance—this Bartleby detaches himself from all human need or desire and acts at no behest other than that of his own unconditioned will.

It is possible that Melville never heard of Karl Marx, although the two men were contemporaries, but Melville's "story of Wall Street" exemplifies in a very striking way the concept of human alienation which plays an important part in Marx's early philosophical writings and has had considerable influence on later sociological thought. Alienation is the condition in which one acts as if at the behest not of one's own will but of some will other (Latin: *alius*) than one's own. For Marx its most important manifestation is in what he called "alienated labor," although he suggested that the phrase was redundant, since all labor is an alienated activity. In Latin *labor* has the meaning of pain and weariness as well as of work that causes pain and weariness, and we use the word to denote work that is in some degree enforced and that goes against the grain of human nature: a culprit is sentenced to a term of "hard labor," not of "hard work." By the same token, not all work is alienated; Marx cites the work of the artist as an example of free activity, happily willed, gratifying and dignifying those who perform it.

In undertaking to explain the reason for the alienated condition of man, Marx refused to accept the idea that it is brought about by the necessities of survival. Man, he said, can meet these necessities with the consciousness of free will, with the sense that he is at one with himself; it is society that alienates man from himself. And Marx held that alienation is at its extreme in those societies which are governed by money-values. In a spirited passage, he describes the process of accumulating capital in terms of the sacrifice of the free human activities that it entails: "The less you eat, drink, and read books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public-house; the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., and the more you *save*—the greater becomes your treasure which neither moth nor dust will devour—your *capital*. The less you *are*, the more you *have*; the less you express your own life, the greater is your *externalized* life—the greater is the store of your alienated being." This describes the program for success in a money society; it was followed, we may note, in his early days by John Jacob Astor, who commands the ironized respect of the narrator of "Bartleby the Scrivener," and no doubt to some extent by the narrator himself. Those members of a money society who do not consent to submit to the program are, of course, no less alienated, and they do not have the comforting illusion of freedom that the power of money can give.

It can be said of Bartleby that he behaves quite as if he were devoting himself to capitalist accumulation. He withdraws from one free human activity after another. If "the theatre, the dance hall, the public-house" had ever been within his ken, they are now far beyond it. If there had ever been a time when he delighted to "think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc.," it has long gone by. He never drinks. He eats less and less, eventually not at all. But of course nothing is further from his intention than accumulation—the self-denial he practices has been instituted in the interests of his freedom, a sad, abstract, metaphysical freedom but the only

one he can aspire to. In the degree that he diminishes his self, he is the less an alienated self: his will is free, he cannot be compelled. A theory of suicide advanced by Sigmund Freud is in point here. It proposes the idea that the suicide's chief although unconscious purpose is to destroy not himself but some other person whom he has incorporated into his psychic fabric and whom he conceives to have great malign authority over him. Bartleby, by his gradual self-annihilation, annihilates the social order as it exists within himself.

An important complication is added to the story of Bartleby's fate by the character and the plight of the nameless narrator. No one could have behaved in a more forbearing and compassionate way than this good-tempered gentleman. He suffers long and is kind; he finds it hard, almost impossible, to do what common sense has long dictated he should do—have Bartleby expelled from the office by force—and he goes so far in charity as to offer to take Bartleby into his own home. Yet he feels that he has incurred guilt by eventually separating himself from Bartleby, and we think it appropriate that he should feel so, even while we sympathize with him; and in making this judgment we share his guilt. It is to him that Bartleby's only moment of anger is directed: " 'I know you,' " says Bartleby in the prison yard, " 'and I want nothing to say to you.' " The narrator is "keenly pained at his implied suspicion" that it was through his agency that Bartleby had been imprisoned, and we are pained for him, knowing the suspicion to be unfounded and unjust. Yet we know why it was uttered.

Bartleby's "I prefer not to" is spoken always in response to an order or request having to do with business utility. We may speculate about what would have happened if the narrator or one of Bartleby's fellow-copyists, alone with him in the office, had had occasion to say, "Bartleby, I feel sick and faint. Would you help me to the couch and fetch me a glass of water?" Perhaps the answer would have been given: " 'I prefer not to.' " But perhaps not.

Criticism: Peter E. Firchow (essay date 1968)

SOURCE: "Bartleby: Man and Metaphor," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. V, 1968, pp. 342-48.

[*Firchow is an American critic. In the following essay, he examines the meaning and significance of the final paragraph of "Bartleby, the Scrivener."*]

"Bartleby," as the anonymous narrator informs us at the very outset of Melville's story, is a brief account of that portion of the life of this strangest of all scribes that the narrator has been privileged to see with his "own astonished eyes." Of other, more ordinary scribes, he almost apologetically explains, he might have related "divers histories," or written even "the complete life." But not for Bartleby: for him "no materials exist" to compile a "full and satisfactory biography." The narrator terms this lack of information "an irreparable loss to literature," and the reader who has pored long over this enigmatic story is tempted to share his sentiments. For want of anything more definite, he must, however, accept the narrator's would-be explanation that Bartleby is simply "one of those beings" about whom very little can be known "except from original sources." He must content himself with viewing Bartleby through the eyes of the narrator alone, and reconcile himself to all the narrator's possible limitations, since "that" is, finally, all there is to be known about the mysterious copyist—with one exception, "one vague report" that the narrator promises will appear in the sequel.

This vague report, as it turns out at the end of the story, is identical with the "one little item of rumor" that comes to the narrator's attention "a few months after the scrivener's decease." The narrator, prudent as usual, hastens to assure the reader that he cannot vouch for the "basis" of this rumor and that he is therefore reluctant to assert its truth. Nevertheless, observing that this news "has not been without a certain suggestive interest" to him, he communicates it to "some others" who might be similarly interested. Bartleby, so the rumor runs, had once been employed as a subordinate clerk in the dead letter office in Washington and had lost his job when

there was a change in the political administration.

That is all there is to this little item of rumor—very little indeed, one is tempted to add. And yet the whole story leads up to it. At the beginning, Melville drops the hint that it will possibly illuminate the mystery of Bartleby: it is the only detail of Bartleby's earlier life that Melville gives us, the only thing, therefore, we can use as an external reference point to explain Bartleby's enigmatic behavior. And at the end of the story the narrator explicitly tells us that it has "a certain suggestive interest." Suggestive of what? If we look at past interpretations of the story, not suggestive of very much; by and large the critics have not shared the narrator's interest in this additional information about Bartleby. Yet the narrator seems to insist upon its importance to the story as a whole. Why? Is this simply an aesthetic blunder on Melville's part, an inartistic excrescence, a tasteless red herring that Melville serves up to conclude an already richly ambiguous repast?

Such, at any rate, has been the conclusion of at least two critics who have paid something more than the most rudimentary attention to it. [In *College English*, February, 1962] Mordecai Marcus condemns it as "an artificial conclusion tacked on as a concession to popular taste," and Charles G. Hoffman goes even further in asserting that it is "the flaw that mars the perfection of the whole. Melville did not leave well enough alone. The ending is anti-climactic." [*South Atlantic Quarterly*, 1953].

Nevertheless, despite these condemnations, the ending is relevant and important to the story. The narrator himself sees that, though of doubtful veracity, this information is of great help in understanding Bartleby and Bartleby's behavior. So, almost immediately after communicating it, he asks the reader to conceive of Bartleby as someone inherently and environmentally ("by nature and misfortune") given to a "pallid hopelessness" even before taking on his clerkship in the dead letter office. The duties of this position, the narrator goes on to speculate, only serve to increase Bartleby's propensity toward melancholy, since he must continually handle and consign to the flames letters that bear irrefutable testimony to the futility of man's attempts to help man:

Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a banknote sent in swiftest charity—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities.

Surrounded by the tangible proofs of man's unhappiness, Bartleby succumbs completely to his already partially existent despair and resolves to take no active part in a life that absurdly rewards all hope with frustration. In the narrator's view, then, the period of Bartleby's life with which the story as such is concerned represents only the inevitable and final working out of a process of retreat from life—or flight into death—that had already begun and had been fully determined by Bartleby's earlier experiences in the dead letter office.

The narrator's analysis of Bartleby's basic "problem" in the light of his previous position is unquestionably one possible interpretation of the story, all the more "possible" since it is the one suggested by the teller of the story himself. Though, to be sure, one should remember here that it might also simply be a further instance of the narrator's habit of rationalizing Bartleby, either of rationalizing him away in a moral sense, or of attempting to fit him into a rational, *i. e.*, rationally explicable, pattern. I shall deal with this possibility somewhat more fully later in this essay. For the moment let us examine the narrator's interpretation as a valid one.

On the surface, this semi-environmental, rational explanation of Bartleby's eccentric behavior seems compelling. It is difficult to quarrel with except on the grounds that it does in fact remain pretty much on the surface. Bartleby is reduced to very little, if anything, more than a kind of stock, sensitive soul, someone who is pushed into extreme depression and eventual madness through a lamentable, if perhaps admirable,

hyper-awareness of the wretchedness of the human condition. But Bartleby seems to be more than merely that, and for that reason the narrator's conventional explanation seems unsatisfying.

Moreover, his explanation, though superficially valid, does not really take into account all that happens, explicitly and implicitly, in the story. It does not, for example, really explain the behavior of the narrator himself when confronted by the mysterious scrivener: why he is so fascinated by Bartleby, why he so persistently attempts to analyse and identify Bartleby. But this confrontation of the narrator and Bartleby is certainly at the heart of Melville's story, and it is this heart that the narrator's own interpretation does not even attempt to reach.

Does this mean that the narrator's explanation is to be rejected? Yes and no, I think. Yes, because ultimately it is a superficial and inadequate explanation; no, because the "suggestive interest" of the new biographical data presented by the narrator at the end of the story is not exhausted by the explanation he himself presents. Much more is implied by it than he explicitly derives from it.

If we look more closely at the passage in which the narrator presents his analysis of the new information about Bartleby, another possible interpretation "suggests" itself, not so much through the information itself (though that, too) as through the narrator's emotional response to it. Immediately after recounting Bartleby's previous activity, the narrator pauses to describe his emotional state: "When I think over this rumor, hardly can I express the emotions which seize me." And in the next sentence he asks himself: "Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?" When the narrator makes this analogy, he can hardly mean that dead letters *sound* like dead men either *in verbo* or *in re*. He cannot mean here *sound* in the normal sense of something that is heard, for unquestionably the two phrases, except for the repeated first word, do not sound the same. What the narrator means by *sound* must consequently be something else, something more like *evoke* or *suggest*. To look at the word in this sense, however, is to uncover one of the most fundamental and fundamentally important metaphors in the story: namely that Bartleby is a dead letter.

The identification of Bartleby with a letter illuminates the central situation of the story. We can then see Bartleby as a letter sent to the narrator and apparently containing a message of importance for him, though the narrator is not entirely sure that this human letter is in fact addressed to him or that it does contain a message for him. Seen in the light of this metaphor, the central situation of the story is transformed into the attempt of the narrator to decipher the address and the message of a letter that has somehow fallen into his hands. The central situation, then, is one of an attempt to communicate and a failure to do so.

An examination of the story reveals much in support of such a view. The narrator, for example, is professionally a "conveyancer and title hunter, and drawer up of recondite documents of all sorts," and his additional position of Master of Chancery shows him as particularly well qualified to read and understand difficult and obscure "documents" of all kinds. He is also, in the words of his own description of himself, a "safe" and "prudent" man. Unlike his employees, Turkey and Nippers, he is an eminently rational man: he is never guilty of the unreasonable behavior of Nippers in the forenoon or Turkey in the afternoon. He is a reasonable man *all of the time*; and he shows this rationality most strikingly in his treatment of Bartleby, so much so, indeed, that the narrator almost becomes a symbol of the rational attitude and Bartleby of the irrational. For example, in dealing with the inscrutable scrivener, the narrator at times operates on something he calls the "doctrine of assumptions": that is, he assumes that if he acts in a certain rational fashion, then Bartleby must respond in logically foreseeable ways. Bartleby of course does not respond in these ways; and on the irrational, immovable rock of Bartleby, the rational doctrine of assumptions founders. Even more obviously, when the narrator asks Bartleby to promise in future to be "a little more reasonable," Bartleby characteristically replies that he would "prefer not to be a little reasonable." It is because Bartleby and Bartleby's behavior will simply not fit into the narrator's habitually rational pattern of thought that the narrator is at such a loss in dealing with him. Transposed into the terms of the metaphor, this situation can be seen as one in which the narrator attempts to read the human letter that Bartleby is, without seeing that it is written in

a "language" he does not know and therefore cannot understand.

The narrator, however, gradually comes to understand that any attempt to interpret Bartleby's significance in a rational manner must be futile and that he must accept the irrational Bartleby for what he is. Significantly, this realization comes to the narrator in terms that explicitly contain the idea of Bartleby as something *sent* to him: "Gradually I slid into the persuasion that these troubles of mine, touching the scrivener, had been all predestined from eternity, and Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all wise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like me to fathom." To be sure, the narrator soon undergoes another change of heart when he sees that an acceptance of Bartleby on Bartleby's own terms will necessarily entail great embarrassment for him in his profession. Not possessing enough courage to rid himself of Bartleby by evicting him forcibly, he leaves himself. In doing so the narrator is, as it were, attempting to avoid accepting the human letter that Providence has sent him; he refuses it by changing his address and successfully resisting all subsequent attempts to have Bartleby "forwarded" to him.

This refusal leads directly to Bartleby's removal to the Tombs—a prison, as the name clearly indicates, that is the metaphoric equivalent of the dead letter office. And like the dead letters that must inevitably be destroyed, Bartleby, too, must die. Still, there may be a final difference, for, as the narrator piously notes as he closes the scrivener's eyes, Bartleby has gone to join "kings and counselors"; unable to reach his earthly destination, perhaps he has finally arrived at his heavenly one.

There are also certain other elements of the story that can perhaps be better understood through a perception of the letter metaphor. The stress on the fact that Bartleby's appearance is "cadaverous," that he is "pallid," or the narrator's vision of Bartleby's corpse "laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding sheet," all these seem to point in hindsight to an equation of Bartleby with a *dead* letter. Furthermore, the oft-noted fact that all the characters in the story, except Bartleby, are either anonymous (the narrator) or pseudonymous (Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut) gains new significance in the light of the epistolary metaphor. Because of their anonymity or pseudonymity, none of them is compelled to accept Bartleby-the-letter as addressed to them personally. They are therefore able to disclaim responsibility for what finally happens to him.

Also, the narrator's inability to "read" Bartleby emphasizes more strongly the already sharp division between them, a division not merely between the rational and the irrational, but also between the active and the passive. The narrator's activity is evident in his attempts to understand and aid Bartleby; Bartleby's passivity is made obvious by the images of death that accompany him throughout the story, though it emerges, too, in his use of his favorite word, *prefer*. This word seems to imply the existence of an active will in Bartleby, a will that has and makes a conscious choice. However, it should be noted that this word is usually qualified by a preceding *would* and is *invariably* followed by a *not*. Though Bartleby has a choice, at least theoretically, he never exercises it; his response is automatically and inexorably negative. In Carlyle's terms, he is essentially a "nay-sayer" and the narrator essentially a "yea-sayer." Despite this, however, the narrator is in a curious fashion in the same position *vis-à-vis* Bartleby as the scrivener was *vis-à-vis* his letters: that is, after seeing all his attempts to succor Bartleby fail, the narrator, like Bartleby in his dead letter office, cannot avoid coming to certain conclusions about the human condition. In arriving at these conclusions, however, the narrator, unlike Bartleby, still keeps his head. As he himself recognizes, he is saved because he is "safe" and "prudent," in a word (also his word) because he has common sense: whereas Bartleby is destroyed because he lacks these qualities. This recognition comes to the narrator immediately after he has been made aware of the full extent of Bartleby's solitude and misery, and after his first rush of heartfelt pity has subsided into fear:

My first emotions had been those of pure melancholy and sincerest pity; but just in proportion as the forlornness of Bartleby grew and grew to my imagination, did that same melancholy merge into fear, that pity into repulsion. So true it is, and so terrible, too, that up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but, in certain special cases, beyond that point it does not. They err who would assert that invariably this is owing to the

inherent selfishness of the human heart. It rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill. To a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, *common sense bids the soul be rid of it.* (Italics mine.)

According to the rumor at the end of the story and the narrator's inferences from it, Bartleby encounters much the same problem during his service in the dead letter office; but Bartleby, it would seem, lacked the "common sense" to bid his soul be rid of the pity he felt. One is reminded in this connection of one of Ishmael's concluding statements in the "Try-Works" chapter of *Moby Dick*: "There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness."

The final long paragraph of the story indicates then—and the epistolary metaphor serves to emphasize—that "Bartleby" is basically a story about the human and not the social condition, that it is less a social indictment and more a symbolic account of the isolation of man, of the impossibility of real communication between men. And a recognition of the function of the final paragraph and of the letter metaphor that is embedded in it reveals that there are no loose ends in this story, but that "Bartleby" is a carefully and fully integrated work of art.

Criticism: Gordon E. Bigelow (essay date 1970)

SOURCE: "The Problem of Symbolist Form in Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener,'" in *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 31, 1970, pp. 345-58.

[Bigelow is an American critic and educator. In the following essay, he proposes that the symbolism in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is too rich to be reduced to a single, definitive meaning.]

One proffers another critique of Melville's "Bartleby" with some diffidence, feeling overawed by a recent bibliography of criticism of the story which contains 117 items and includes the names of the most formidable Melville scholars [Donald M. Fiene, "A Bibliography of Criticism of 'Bartleby the Scrivener,'" in *Melville Annual 1965. A Symposium: "Bartleby the Scrivener,"* edited by Howard P. Vincent, 1966]. The diversity of critical reaction to the story is striking. Some critics focus upon Bartleby, some upon the unnamed lawyer-narrator, some upon both. Some read the story as a parable of the thwarted artist, as Melville's *non serviam* to a hostile Philistine society; some read it as a study in abnormal psychology in which Bartleby, or the narrator, or both, are schizophrenic; some read it as a social satire, a bitter attack upon a society too much devoted to heartless commercialism; some read it theologically, as a parable of free will, moral responsibility, and judgment; some read it existentially, stressing Bartleby's Kafkaesque alienation in an absurd universe. Some see Bartleby as a projection of the narrator's own death wish (or Melville's), or as the narrator's alter ego, or as his conscience; some see him as a Christ figure, or as Christ himself incarnated in a nineteenth-century Wall Street law office. Some discuss "symbols" in the story: the whiteness, the dead walls, the living green of the grass in the court-yard of the prison where Bartleby dies.

In an attempt to illuminate some aspect of the story or other, critics have cited parallels or sources or influences in the Bible, Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson, Thoreau, Dostoevski, Gogol, Chekhov, Camus, Kafka, Kierkegaard, Buber, Pascal, Montaigne, and Shakespeare. The lawyernarrator has been related in some fashion to Melville's brother Allen, his uncle Peter Gansevoort, his father-in-law Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw of Massachusetts, Evert Duyckinck, Everyman, the Prophet Jonah, Captain "Starry" Vere, Captain Amasa Delano, and the Lord God Jehovah. Bartleby himself has been related to Christ, to one of the least of Christ's brethren, to Everyman, Benito Cereño, Billy Budd, the Confidence Man, Ishmael, Ahab, Pierre, Plotinus Plinlimmon, Israel Potter, Pip, Hunilla, a tragic white-faced clown, a Buddhist monk, a sannyasi Hindu monk, Natty Bumppo, Mahatma Ghandi, Job, Teufelsdröckh, Holmes's Elsie Venner, Thoreau, Poe's William

Wilson, Walter Mitty, and Melville himself.

With this great multiplicity of readings we encounter not simply variety but out-and-out contradiction. Can *Bartleby* be like a sannyasi, practicing a systematic resignation which eventually sublimates away his life, and at the same time be like Christ, whose function is to redeem life? Can the narrator be a cynical hedonist and, at the same time, a compassionate Good Samaritan? Can such disparate readings of the story all be valid? I think the answer is *yes*. Not that all readings seem equally satisfying or that any reading will do; but most, including those that are mutually contradictory, seem to have some validity. All seem partial, able to account for some aspects of the story but not for others. Virtually all seem written in answer to the same compelling question: what does the story *mean*? I do not propose here another reading of this sort, though I believe others are possible. I would like to shift the question to read: what kind of thing is this story? Perhaps by asking questions about form it will be possible to "explain" the other critiques, at least to the extent of explaining why there are so many of them. It will soon become apparent that my problem here, and my purpose, is as much to grope toward a critical method for dealing with fiction of this sort as to produce an interpretation of this particular story.

I begin with an assumption which serious readers of Melville have made for some time—that he is a symbolist writer and "*Bartleby*" a symbolist story. By symbolist, I mean a story that is intentionally symbolic in mode, not simply symbolic in the organ-tone sense that would apply to all literature. More specifics of what I take symbolic to mean will emerge in subsequent discussion. Although I will discuss symbolism in the story, this will be no safari into deep reading of particular symbols. It is not symbols like raisins in a cake, but symbolism as a way of seeing, as a literary form productive of meaning, which is my topic. It will be convenient to discuss the various aspects of symbolist form as if they were discrete factors which could be examined separately. Actually, each one involves all the others, since all originate in a single mysterious center of which each is but one vector.

(1) *Symbolic pregnancy; implied metaphor*

One hallmark of symbolist writing is its ability to arouse in the reader a haunting sense that he is in the presence of deep meaning which he *feels* but cannot quite articulate. Poe records the experience in "*Ligeia*," where the narrator, peering deep into Ligeia's eyes, feels always on the verge of penetrating the mystery they contain, like a man on the verge of remembering something he has forgotten and cannot quite bring to mind. "What was it?" [he asked himself]. "I was possessed with a passion to know. . . . How frequently, in my intense scrutiny of Ligeia's eyes, have I felt approaching the full knowledge of their expression—felt it approaching—yet not quite be mine—and so at length entirely depart!" This is the first part of the experience with a symbolist writing, the engrossing, compelling sense of engagement, the continuous question: what does it mean? Then the recurring sense of approaching enlightenment, as if the mind were about to enclose the meaning in full knowledge, only to have this illumination fade away before the climactic revelation. From the sheer number of readings, it seems clear that "*Bartleby*" has this ability to engage and to arouse the question of meaning. From the great variety of readings, it seems clear that no one has arrived at a definitive version of its meaning, and one suspects that probably no one ever will.

All readers sense that the characters, the events, the elements of setting in this story imply meaning beyond themselves. Nothing remains what it seems. This is what Coleridge meant by the "translucence" of the symbol, whereby a larger meaning than is contained in an object is seen through the object. Ernst Cassirer's suggestive phrase for this is "symbolic pregnancy." W. Y. Tindall calls it "embodied or immanent analogy" and finds it to be the chief differentia of the symbolist mode in literature. He suggests that in fiction of this kind most story elements seem to be one-half of an analogy whose other half is unstated. In the present story, the words "wall" or "dead-wall" or "Wall Street" will not remain at rest as simple elements of realistic description. One feels continuously compelled to search for the other thing they belong to. One stands, as it were, on one foot, urgently looking for the place to put the other foot down so that one can stand at ease; and

for "wall" this may be any of a number of different places—"death," "alienation," "wasteland"—because the author does not specify. But it is important to note that the first element of symbolist form is not a thing but a force, a pulling or urgency, a compulsion to find "meaning," and this is why so much of the criticism of the story takes the form of exegesis.

Implied or unstated metaphor also exists in "Bartleby" at other more generalized levels usually subsumed under the word "myth" in current criticism; this sometimes involves principles other than analogy. One such principle is the *principle of juxtaposition*, whereby two things are simply placed together without comment so that each becomes involved in the other's ambience, thus producing a tensive area of meaning somewhere between the two which partakes of both but has its own distinct character. Along with this often goes a second principle which might be called the *principle of cumulation or resonance*, which simply means the device of repeating juxtapositions of a similar kind until a definite tone or "resonance" is established. Melville does not say that Bartleby is Christ or even that he is like Christ; he simply assigns to him phrase after phrase and action after action which accumulate an unmistakable resonance of particular meaning: "man of sorrow," "forlornest of mankind," "He answered nothing," "his wonderful mildness," "He was always there," "Having taken three days to meditate . . . he still preferred to abide with me." In the context of Western culture, such phrases inevitably configure to form one possible version of the unstated half of an implied metaphor. A similar cumulation conjures into hovering presence over the story the passage from Matthew 25 where Christ as judge separates the goats from the sheep. Nothing explicit in the story certifies the implication of judgment, and some elements of the story stand opposed to it; but it is hard to escape the strong suggestion that Bartleby is Christ or one of Christ's poor, and that the lawyer-narrator and the other persons in the Wall Street law office, that is, Wall Street itself and the civilization it represents, are under judgment in accordance with the way they react to the silent scrivener.

(2) *Meaning as process or flow*

In a well-known passage from the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne tells of finding an embroidered piece of ragged red cloth rolled up in parchment. As he contemplated this object, he felt that deep meaning streamed forth from it, subtly communicating itself to his sensibilities, but evading the analysis of his mind. But he also felt that this meaning was "most worthy of interpretation," that is, of reduction to concept or idea or moral principle. Most critics have approached "Bartleby" in this fashion, looking upon it as if it had a single fixed, topical meaning, or as if it were a sign pointing to a meaning outside of itself in a realm of ideas, and the critic's job were to paraphrase that meaning, or to decipher a somewhat blurred inscription on that sign so he could tell us what it pointed to. The trouble is that the story points in a number of different directions at the same time, as the multiplicity of readings suggests. In one of these directions might lie a realm of eternal order and unchanging ideas, but in another lies an absurd universe without rational order, and in still another direction the existential world of the 1850's, and perhaps beyond all of these an ineffable realm of the Absolute. To deal with the story, we are at last driven back to the story, which we discover points mainly to itself; and we learn that we must grant the story its own mode of existence, which may overlap other modes but does not correspond to any other in a one-to-one relationship. The story as a whole would appear to be a "symbol" in Cassirer's sense of an intellectual or spiritual form "which produces and posits a world of its own" [*Language and Myth*, translated by Susanne K. Langer]. He notes that "symbolic forms are not imitations, but *organs* of reality." "We must see in each of these spiritual forms," he writes, "a spontaneous law of generation; an original way and tendency of expression which is more than a mere record of something initially given in fixed categories of real existence."

Much of our problem with "Bartleby" dissolves if we cease to expect it to have a single meaning, but instead look upon it as a generator of a continuous flow of meaning, which means kinetically, organically, as it is *experienced* by a particular reader. If the flow is stopped, analytical reason will simply burn a hole through this kind of literary fabric. In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice made this discovery when she found herself at one point in a quaint little shop:

The shop seemed to be full of all manner of curious things—but the oddest part of it was, that whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was quite empty; though the others round it were crowded full as they could hold. "Things flow about here so!" she said at last.

Alice also discovered that one aspect of this flow was a metamorphic change of forms. A few moments earlier the quaint little shop had been a forest; the long-nosed white sheep knitting behind the counter had been the white queen. Change in "Bartleby" is not so startling, but change there certainly is.

(3) *Metamorphosis; ambiguity*

Not delineation, with its stable, clearly realized forms, but chiaroscuro, with its shadows and areas of meaning defined by contrasting highlights, is the technique employed in this story—chiaroscuro and a continuous shifting of forms. In spite of a relatively straightforward plot and a certain realism in the Wall Street setting, very little remains stable. The story is polarized along an axis between the narrator and Bartleby, but both poles of this axis change continuously and even, as we shall see, merge into one another.

Bartleby may be simply a pale, silent scrivener, a human derelict; or he may be a schizophrenic in a catatonic trance, or another incarnation of Christ, or a petulant, stubborn nonconformist, refusing to be "reasonable." One's reading of the story depends upon which of these one takes him to be, and equally important, which of a number of contradictory possibilities one takes the narrator to be, for he is equally unstable. He tells us that he is an "eminently safe" man, esteemed by his rich clients for his prudence; he openly admits that he lives by the hedonistic principle that "the easiest way of life is the best." On Sunday mornings he attends a fashionable church, but he also equates the Christian law of love with self-interest. He is a kindly employer, but speaks with bemused callousness of the poverty of his employees and of the withering boredom and frustration of their work. During most of the story he is "the boss," who benefits from and wields the power of an oppressive and ruthless society. But he fits no single stereotype or category; he is no Scrooge; he is too indecisive and too humane.

He is further defined and further blurred by his relationship to Bartleby. If we heed the massive evidence suggesting that Bartleby is Christ or one of Christ's poor, then the narrator should be defined by how he answers the divine command given in Matthew 25 to feed such poor, to clothe him, and to visit him when sick or in prison. The lawyer-narrator does indeed respond to Bartleby in most definite fashion, but his response runs a bewildering spectrum. He is at first indifferent to him, no more aware of him than of the office furniture. But as Bartleby progressively refuses to do his work or to leave, the narrator tries to reason with him, to bribe him, to intimidate him, to evict him; and when the stranger will not forsake him, he moves out and leaves him alone on the premises. He appears on all counts to violate the divine command, yet paradoxically he also fulfills it. When Bartleby is sick and in prison, he visits him and gives money to feed him. He offers to find him another kind of work, he offers him his office, and finally he offers to care for him in his own home. So that in the end his reactions to Bartleby vary from detachment, to ironic amusement, to anger, to bewilderment, and at last to deep and genuine compassion. The story suggests that he is like Pilate in questioning the stranger, like Judas in betraying him to the law, like St. Peter in thrice denying him, but also like the Good Samaritan in caring for him.

In coming to terms with the narrator, or with Bartleby, which handle does one grasp? Melville has made it impossible to fix upon one to the exclusion of the others. As in so many of Hawthorne's stories, the reader is presented with multiple choices, but with no indication as to which choice he should make. One can produce a stable thematic reading of this story only by accepting certain facets of character to the exclusion of others; otherwise, like Alice we must accept the fact that "things flow about here so." This means that at last we must accept in a fiction of this kind the principle of metamorphic change and a degree of paradox and ambiguity which no effort of mind can compel into focus; we must settle for *indefiniteness* as the basic condition of the

symbolist writing, for Wallace Stevens' "ever-never-changing same."

(4) *Perspectivism*

When Alice was talking to Humpty Dumpty, she could not decide whether to compliment him on his belt or his cravat. " 'If I only knew,' she said, 'which was waist and which was neck' "—that is, which frame of reference or perspective to adopt. This same quandary constitutes another part of our problem with "Bartleby."

Point of view in this story is usually understood to be established by the lawyer-narrator, who tells the reader directly about his experience with the pale scrivener. No one could quarrel that the story comes to us from the mouth of the lawyer, but since he and the person he chiefly contemplates are in a continuous process of metamorphic change, it is difficult to say what perspective, except a floating one, is established. We start out assuming that we are to be told a story about a scrivener named Bartleby, but before long we suspect that this may be a story about the narrator himself, or perhaps it is really about ourselves, about all men.

We encounter the same difficulty in our attempt to adopt some stance toward Bartleby. Like the narrator, we are not sure whether we ought to hate him or to love him. We do not know whether we have common cause with him or with the narrator, or with both, or with neither, or something of all of these. Which perspectives are available to us will depend, not only on the story, but also radically upon our own subjectivity. Meanings stream forth from the story, but one sees only those meanings caught by one's own lens or filter. In part one sees a version of oneself reflected back from the story, and this is a symbolist principle with which Melville himself was thoroughly familiar. Everyone recalls the chapter from *Moby Dick* where the doubloon has been nailed to the mast and Captain Ahab and each of his mates in turn stand before the symbolic object and ruminate in Shakespearean soliloquy about its meaning. We recognize at once that the remarks of each reveal the man as much as the coin, and we recall the words of Pip the wise fool: "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look."

The critiques of "Bartleby" clearly reveal this same pattern: the psychologist sees schizophrenia; the reader interested in archetypes sees a father-son myth; the reader oriented to biography and history sees a Melville family allegory; the reader oriented to theology sees a reenactment of the Passion and a parable of Judgment. This same kind of perspectivism would of course hold true in some measure for any art work, as the innumerable readings of *Hamlet* bear witness, but it is especially relevant to a symbolist writing where so much is deliberately left problematic. It is through this opening that the symbol-chaser breaks through to gambol about with freest abandon. With so few elements of the story certifiable or even specifiable, the field is open for the most extravagant intrusion of the reader's subjectivity. This whole matter of subject and object, of the inner and outer worlds and their relationship, is particularly interesting in literature of the symbolist mode, and it constitutes one major aspect of our next rubric.

(5) *Presence and coalescence*

Most of us who inherit Western culture still live by the dualism of Descartes which separates mind from matter, thinking subject from the objects of thought. And most of us are also positivists, tending to accept as "real" chiefly those aspects of reality which can be dealt with using the methods of physical science. We habitually view reality in visual, spatial terms; we convert sensory experience into solid, fixed objects which we locate *out there* in space. We allow these objects to have the measurable properties of mass, extension, and motion, and a life which is an invisible dance of atoms, but we reserve their other qualities such as color and smell to our own subjectivity.

These attitudes tend to suppress another kind of life which might be called the "felt presence" of some aspect of the real world. This can manifest itself in a person, a tree, a stone, a mountain, a cloud, an animal, or a

river. Primitive peoples commonly have a strong awareness of such presence or mana, which they often conceive as spiritual beings like nymphs or dryads which inhabit various parts of the phenomenal world. This is not personification or the projection of the ego upon the natural realm as in Ruskin's pathetic fallacy. It involves a flow of spiritual force the other way—from out there in—which is met by a flow from in here out. Wordsworth was keenly aware of such presence from boyhood, and many modern poets allude to it. Hopkins' "inscape" and "instress" are related to it, as are Joyce's *quidditas* and epiphany, D. H. Lawrence's "divine otherness," Wallace Stevens' "vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X," and William Carlos Williams' way of viewing the red wheelbarrow in the rain.

In Martin Buber's well-known formulation, the I, by becoming bound up *in relation with* some part of the world, begins to see it as a *Thou*. I-It of Cartesian dualism becomes I-Thou of co-presence. In such case a tree ceases to be simply a thing, but is accepted as having a kind of personhood. "The tree is no impression," writes Buber, "no play of my imagination, no value depending upon my mood; but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it. . . ."

Presence of this sort figures in this story chiefly in two ways—in Bartleby and in the Wall Street setting. One way of defining the action of the story is to describe it as the modulation of the narrator's attitude toward Bartleby from I-It to I-Thou. We watch the narrator's gradual renunciation of his own sovereign will (his "doctrine of assumptions") and his ego-centered universe in which Bartleby exists only as object; and we see his gradual acknowledgment of Bartleby's unique presence (Bartleby's "preferences"). Bartleby's silent presence gradually infiltrates the entire office and all the people in it, as is made plain by the spread of his word "prefer."

The Wall Street setting must also be seen here as presence. Continuous symbolic notation of dead walls, cisterns, bricks and mortar, stones, whiteness, the Tombs, and pyramids creates a dark entity which makes itself felt as a sinister, engulfing, deathlike force. Wall Street is a place, but it is also people, and we come here to one phase of "coalescence." The place is permeated by particular facets of human character, which it expresses: acquisitiveness, selfish hedonism, callous exploitation of the weak, ruthless suppression of nonconformity. As in William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, the city is the people, the people are the city. There is an "interpenetration both ways." All the characters in the story express the Wall Street presence in some fashion; all *are* Wall Street, ironical master and suffering victim alike. This is particularly apparent in Bartleby's fellow scribes, Turkey and Nippers, who are usually admired for their grotesque Dickensian vividness. These two function almost more as part of setting than as agents, expressing the crushing presence of the place quite as well as do the dead walls.

"Coalescence," that meeting of I and Thou in a binding relation, or that interpenetration of subject and object in a realm of co-presence, occurs in the story in other ways. Suppose we restrict our view for the moment to the "world" created by the story itself. In this case, the lawyer-narrator would appear as subject; and Bartleby, the other characters, and all aspects of setting would assume the nature of objects. But as several critics have noted, Bartleby and the narrator overlap in so many respects that Bartleby has been called the narrator's alter ego. Bartleby strikes most readers as an Everyman, but so does the narrator. Both are described as sons of Adam; both epitomize Wall Street. And as we have just noted, the main course of events in the story shows the narrator ending his own exclusiveness step by step to enter at last the circle of Bartleby's existence. There is, in a word, a progressive coalescence of subject and object at this level.

If we enlarge our circle of consideration so that the reader becomes subject and the story as a whole becomes object, we find the same tendency toward coalescence. Just as the narrator contemplates Bartleby, so do we over his shoulder, his dilemma of what to do about him becoming our dilemma, his question of meaning our question. We cannot help identifying with Everyman-narrator—or, paradoxically, with Everyman-Bartleby. As readers, we merge with both master and victim, and recognize that from either perspective their world is also our world.

We should not fail to connect what we have said about presence and coalescence to earlier comments about meaning as process or flow. Presence usually makes itself felt in fleeting moments of impact upon the senses, often upon senses other than sight. It comes, is vividly apprehensible for a moment, and is gone, like Emily Dickinson's hummingbird or Wallace Stevens' pheasant disappearing into the brush. Melville's story, it seems to me, works upon us in exactly this fashion, producing strong but passing moments of awareness, which are the despair of criticism because, as Hawthorne said, they evade the analysis of our mind. Closely related to the evanescent movement of presence in symbolist fiction is a shifting polarity which becomes our next major topic.

(6) "*Field, " or tensive context, and synecdoche*

In a striking passage from E. E. Cummings' experimental play *Him*, the main character reads from his notebook the following reflections about the nature of the real world:

These solidities and silences which we call "things" are not separate units of experience, but are poises, self-organising collections. There are no entities, no isolations, no abstractions; but there are departures, voyages, arrivals, contagions. I have seen an instant of consciousness as a heap of jackstraws. This heap is not inert; it is a kinesis fatally composed of countless mutually dependent stresses, a product-and-quotient of innumerable perfectly interrelated tensions. Tensions (by which any portion flowing through every other portion becomes the whole) are the technique and essence of Being.

This passage nicely summarizes much of the modern symbolist view of reality, but we are particularly interested at this point in two parts of it: the idea of kinetic tension as the essence of reality, and the idea of one portion of a kinesis somehow becoming the whole.

Cummings' words run parallel to statements by the philosophers of symbolism: "Every actual thing," writes Alfred North Whitehead, "is something by reason of its activity; whereby its nature consists in its relevance to other things, and its individuality consists in its synthesis of other things so far as they are relevant to it." Susanne Langer makes a similar statement when she describes meaning as a function of a term: "A function is a *pattern* viewed with reference to one special term round which it centers; this pattern emerges when we look at a given term *in its total relation to the other terms about it.*" Charles Olson and others have made familiar the concept of a poem as a high-energy construct, analogous to a force field in physics, and Olson insists that poetry should be "composition by field."

I propose that Melville's story should be regarded as such a field and that it has meaning according to the tensive relationships which it sets up. The elements of the field we have already sufficiently noted—the Wall Street law office, the various characters, the events—but we should take a longer look at the power of tensive context to *create* meaning, and understand how one portion of such a field can in a real sense become the whole. Bartleby's oftenrepeated statement, "I would prefer not to," will provide a good illustration. Taken by itself, this is simply an innocuous refusal, a "no" couched in genteel language. Within the context of this story it becomes charged with multiple meanings of unusual poignance. It is an epitome of Bartleby's heroic (or petulant) refusal to co-operate with the establishment. It is tragic because expressive of Bartleby's estrangement and death by inanition. It is comic according to the principle of repetition described by Bergson. It represents the noble ethic of Christian passive resistance, or the principle of resignation and fatalistic despair, or the principle of existential free will, or the oppressive spirit of capitalist exploitation, and so on. Most of the currents of meaning within this complex story can be seen to flow through this simple sentence. *Within its context* it invokes all the other elements of that context.

Here we can see operating one of the fundamental principles of symbolism—the flow of the many in the one, the one in the many. For lack of a better term we can call this the *principle of synecdoche*, though the

limitations of the old rhetorical definition are apparent. This is no simple substitution of a part for the whole. There is no substitution at all. The part retains its own integrity as part while at the same time belonging to and invoking the whole. The principle is easiest to observe, perhaps, when the part is a person rather than so abstract a thing as a sentence. Bartleby himself could serve admirably as a synecdoche for the entire story, but so could the narrator, and so, with more effort of imagination, could Turkey or Nippers. At still another level, the principle of synecdoche functions with great power if one takes the whole story as a microcosm of the modern world.

It should be noted, as we conclude, that Melville makes no use in this story of the incantatory and musical techniques so important to symbolist poets like Poe and Mallarmé. But even though it is heretical these days to speak of an author's intentions, one wonders if part of Melville's intention with "Bartleby" was not like Poe's openly avowed intention in his poems—to be *affective*, to modify the consciousness of the reader. Poe wanted his poems to have an effect like that of music, to produce an "elevation of the soul." John Senior has argued convincingly that some symbolist poems, like those of Mallarmé, seem to be intended to act like *yantras*, those symbolic designs used by oriental occultists to assist the process of meditation by unhinging the mind from its customary anchors to physical reality and freeing it to penetrate to visionary realms. It is tempting to suggest that something like this was part of Melville's intention with "Bartleby," though "proof" is hard to come by.

In our attempt to identify the elements of symbolist form in this story, we have returned again and again to the great inclusive principle of process or flow. The story seems to be a piece struck from Whitman's "float forever held in solution," implicit with the same ambiguity and mystery as life itself, with that inscrutability which fascinated and appalled Melville during his whole career. Most of us feel uneasy in the presence of something which resists the grasp of our minds. We have that little corner of Ahab in us which hates the inscrutable thing. Perhaps that is because, as Blake prayed to be, we need to be delivered "from single vision and Newton's sleep"—from the limited vision of empirical science. We may need at least what Blake described as the "two-fold vision," the ability to perceive analogically, in images, in order to come to terms with "Bartleby." Until we have this kind of vision, which I suspect was Melville's own when he wrote the story, we must remain like the baffled narrator in Poe, peering deep into Ligeia's eyes, always on the verge of knowing the secret contained in their depths, but fated to exclaim at last: "What was it? I was possessed with a passion to know. . . ."

Criticism: Sanford Pinsker (essay date 1975)

SOURCE: " 'Bartleby the Scrivener': Language as Wall," in *College Literature*, Vol. II, No. 1, Winter 1975, pp. 17-27.

[*Pinsker is an American scholar and poet, and the author of several books on contemporary American literature. He has a particular interest in American humor and is known for his own witty critical style. In the following essay, he interprets "Bartleby, the Scrivener" as a statement on the inability of language to fully circumscribe human experience.*]

Melville's puzzling story "Bartleby the Scrivener" threatens to make scriveners of us all, endlessly writing those dead letters called literary criticism. Scholars with a biographical bent have pointed out the parallels between the disaffected Bartleby and his equally disaffected author. Both were professional scriveners; both "preferred" to withdraw. For others, the story is a study in the application of passive resistance, one a Gandhi might have read for aid and comfort. More recently attention has shifted from Bartleby to the lawyer who narrates Bartleby's tale and, in the process, attempts to understand him. I am convinced that looking an enigmatic figure like Bartleby in the eye is something akin to staring into a blank wall. And whatever else critics might be, they are not Supermen. One must come at a Bartleby from a safely oblique angle—by

focusing on that "eminently *safe* man," the lawyernarrator, whose sensibilities are crucial to an understanding of Melville's story.

As epigraph for that impressionistic study in human guilt, *Lord Jim*, Joseph Conrad chose the following maxim from Novalis: "It is certain my conviction gains infinitely, the moment another soul will believe in it." Granted, willing believers are never found in large supply, *Lord Jim* is an account of the complications that arise when one heart opens to another. Initially, it is Jim who needs a sympathetic Marlow; later, it is Marlow who is haunted by Jim's memory, as he tries to convince an "audience" (and himself?) about the meaning of such a life. The novel's "title" may refer to Jim, but the *novel* itself is Marlow's. For the ambivalent Marlow, to become Jim's secret-sharer is as dangerous and slippery an enterprise as it ultimately is a humanizing one. Thus, Conrad tests out the complexities which lurk just beneath our clearly defined notions about right and wrong, as well as the isolation which results from even the best attempts at empathy. Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," on the other hand, is less concerned with the possibilities of *opening* oneself to another "conviction" than it is in demonstrating the barriers which impede the process. Significantly enough, Melville's sub-title is "A Story of Wall Street." Unlike Marlow, Melville's narrator discovers that language only makes the haunting Bartleby more perplexing and less definable. "Walls" are the central motif of Melville's story, extending from the Wall Street locale suggested by the sub-title, through a maze of physical walls which separate one man from another and, finally, to those walls of language which make human understanding impossible.

According to the late John Jacob Astor, the lawyernarrator is a man whose first grand point is "prudence" and his second, "method." Such commendations mean much, especially to one who loves repeating Astor's name because "it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like bullion." The symmetry here—circular, rounded images, as if an emblem of completeness itself—suggests a man with a taste for the classics, exactly the sort of person who would keep a bust of Cicero on his shelf. To be sure, ironies always lurk around the dark corners of such a walled-in, safe world. By *safe*, what the narrator really means is unthreatened, secure, pompously smug in his assurance that God is in His heaven, Cicero is on his shelf, and all is right on Wall Street.

In short, the lawyer is a man out to control a tiny universe with an inflated and self-serving rhetoric. Melville's tone, on the other hand, makes it clear that the lawyer is no exception to the rule which operates daily in, say, angry letters-to-the-editor: given enough space, most people betray themselves in print. For example, the lawyer-narrator proudly claims that he seldom loses his temper. And yet Melville juxtaposes this quietism with a revealing burst of indignation:

. . . but I must be permitted to be rash here and declare that I consider the sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Master of Chancery, by the new Constitution, as a pre-mature act; inasmuch as I had counted upon a life-lease of the profits, whereas I only received those of a few short years. But this is by the way.

Whatever else the deleted expletive and unbridled passion might signify, it is hardly "by the way." The lawyer's sensibility is revealed by the widening distances between rhetoric and existential reality. In this sense descriptions given to Turkey and Nippers are necessary pre-conditions of a world in which Bartleby will become an unsettling intruder.

Turkey is characterized as:

.. . a short, pousy Englishman of about my age, that is, somewhere not far from sixty. In the morning, one might say, his face was of a fine florid hue, but after twelve o'clock meridian—his dinner hour—it blazed like a grate full of Christmas coals; and continued blazing—but, as it were, with a gradual wane—till 6 o'clock P.M. or thereabouts, after which

I saw no more the proprietor of the face, which gaining its meridian with the sun, seemed to set with it, to rise, culminate, and decline the following day, with the like regularity and undiminished glory.

The result may be an eccentric, volatile personality, but one with clock-like regularity: during the morning hours he is "the quickest, steadiest creature, too, accomplishing a great deal of work in a style not easy to be matched," while, in the afternoon, he is "incautious in dipping his pen into his inkstand." Blots, a noisy chair, spilled sand boxes, split pens and a generally "indecorous manner" follow lunch like the night the day. An older notion of psychology might write Turkey down as a Humour character, most probably phlegmatic. To modern ears the lawyer's description sounds like a textbook definition for the manic-depressive—albeit, one regularized until he emerges as tolerable.

This is especially true if one sees Turkey and Nippers as complementary units in a scenario of absurdity. Nippers is a neurotic, one who brings his anal temperament to the scrivener's table; as compulsion would have it, he "could never get this table to suit him":

He put chips under it, blocks of various sorts, bits of pasteboard, and at last went so far as to attempt an exquisite adjustment by final pieces of folded blotting-paper. But no invention would answer. If, for the sake of easing his back, he brought the table lid at a sharp angle well up toward his chin, and wrote there like a man using the steep roof of a Dutch house for his desk—then he declared that it stopped the circulation in his arms. If now he lowered the table to his waistbands and stooped over it in writing, then there was a sore aching in his back. In short, Nippers knew not what he wanted.

To the beleaguered lawyer, there is a "logical" explanation and/or convenient rationale for the apparent craziness which surrounds him. Turkey claims that "we are *both* getting old" and the remark strikes home. Prudence demands that he restrict the sort of work given to the afternoon (and, therefore, accident-prone) Turkey, but "humanity" requires that he keep him. With Nippers, "Ambition and indigestion" explain the neurotic quirks. In short, there are *words*—names, labels, etc. —which help to bring the erratic behavior within the bounds of what could be called "tolerable irritations." Besides,

It was fortunate for me, that owing to its peculiar cause—indigestion—the irritability and subsequent nervousness of Nippers, were mainly observable in the morning, while in the afternoon he was comparatively mild. So that Turkey's paroxysms only coming on about twelve o'clock, I never had to do with their eccentricities at one time. Their fits relieved each other like guards. When Nippers's was on, Turkey's was off; and vice versa. This was a good natural arrangement under the circumstances.

In short, there is a fearful symmetry here which the lawyer can depend upon. Such is the stuff of which his "good natural arrangement" is made.

Bartleby calls the consensus reality into question by refusing to be rhetorically understood. The physical walls which separate employer and scrivener operate at one level of reality; the walls of language operate, more insidiously, at a deeper one. According to the lawyer, compromise is what makes life both safe and comfortably satisfying. His description of the office provides a model of the bureaucratic mind at its most functional:

I should have stated before that ground glass folding-doors divided my premises into two parts, one of which was occupied by my scriveners, the other by myself. According to my humour I threw open these doors, or closed them. I resolved to assign Bartleby a corner by the folding-doors, but on my side of them, so as to have this quiet man within easy call, in

case any trifling matter was to be done. I placed his desk close up to a small side-window in that part of the room, a window which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain grimy back-yards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light . . . Still further to a satisfactory arrangement, I procured a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice. And thus, in a manner, privacy and society were conjoined.

The "high green folding screen" suggests an ironic garden in much the same way that the lawyer's notion of a "privacy and society" conjoined is an ironic comment on the facts of the situation. Removed from sight—the purpose, after all, of *walls*—Bartleby is, nonetheless, within easy range of verbal commands. His is a "green world," albeit one made from barriers of convenience. It is here that the nuances suggest ironic parallels to the biblical Garden. Like Adam, the lawyer gains dominion over the "others" of his world by *naming* them. Language is, then, a medium of control, of that which simultaneously creates a reality and imposes it. To be sure, if the green screen is an ironic touch, so too are the identifications between an Adamic use of language and that found in the postlapsarian world of Wall Street. Which is to say, the law office is emblematic of the human tragedy writ small; if the timid lawyer is no Cicero (on principle he "never addresses a jury," much less a Cataline), he is also no Faust, no Hamlet. In his insistence that language can pluck the heart out of human mysteries he is more akin to meddlers like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Bartleby's recurrent "I would prefer not to" is as effective a ploy as his "choice" of this particular lawyer-narrator is fortunate. What is essential, of course, is not so much the battle cry of passive resistance (*anybody* can learn to regurgitate "I would prefer no to") but a certain *style* on the part of the speaker and a certain *vulnerability* in the audience. The alternating current thus established completes the necessary relationship between victimizer and victim. In Melville's story, the special (albeit, acceptable) tyranny of the lawyer is obvious; he manipulates office personnel in much the same way he rearranges furniture, balancing a Turkey with a Nippers, the tedious work of copying against his own best advantage. If eccentricity of the Turkey/Nippers stripe betrays a human touch which can be controlled, Bartleby's very passivity calls the prevailing ground rules into question:

Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises.

This is what I mean by the force of personal *style*. Bartleby is the enigmatic personality *par excellence*, the mystery always incarnate. His haunting presence brings the lawyer's half-ridden vulnerabilities into bold relief. In a recent psychoanalytic treatment of the story Morton Kaplan quotes this line—"But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me"; and then adds this commentary:

We note that he still imagines violence, which he refers to now as a "dreadful passion," as his only alternative to inaction. There is, in his repeated association to violence, the suggestion that he is passive with Bartleby because, for him, *any* action implies getting violent. . . . Perhaps, we can begin to infer, the overriding motive of his life has been a struggle to contain violence latent within him, violence needing only the smallest conflict to set it off.
[Morton Kaplan and Robert Kloss, *The Unspoken Motive*, 1973]

Later Kaplan provides a psychoanalysis of Bartleby himself, suggesting that he suffers from a psychosis "so complete that he breaks with reality." However, such confusions of a character's function and an analyst's problem reduce literature to mere formula, and criticism to Viennese jargon. This is especially true of Melville's disturbing story. That Bartleby may—or may not—be a psychotic is simply beside the point. In any event, the textual evidence is scanty, and it is Bartleby's impact on the lawyer which remains the crucial

matter. As Kaplan would have it, the lawyer's vulnerability results from overcompensating for a latently violent personality. As a man of *law*, intimations of the "criminal hidden within" can indeed have unsettling consequences. *That* story, however, is Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer," not, I would submit, Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener."

Rather it is the *silence* in Bartleby's posture, his Sphinx-like refusal to elaborate, which is so distressing. In the crucial scene when Bartleby first utters the choral refrain about "preferring not to," sound business practice, pragmatism and all the lawyer has lived by would demand that he simply chuck the insolent fellow out. Instead, he hesitates, betraying himself in a highly significant bit of rationalization: "But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-Paris bust of Cicero out of doors." Later it is Bartleby who will keep "his glance fixed upon my [i. e. the lawyer's] bust of Cicero, which, as I then sat, was directly behind me, some six inches above my head." The plaster-of-Paris bust not only represents that blankness associated with the story's motif of "walls," but the efficacy of language as well. As I have mentioned, rhetoric is the means by which understanding is achieved and necessary accommodations are made. The tight-lipped Bartleby signals that final breakdown of communication which is one form of the apocalypse. The lawyer's deepest fears are not those of latent violence made manifest, but fears of having to confront the isolation and loneliness which result when language itself disintegrates.

The remainder of the story, then, is a carefully paced account of the lawyer's reluctant initiation into these dark realities. It begins with an appeal to consensus reality, one the lawyer describes as "some reinforcement for his own faltering mind." Ironically enough, to ward off the absurdity which Bartleby represents, the lawyer confides in Turkey and Nippers:

"Turkey," said I, "what do you think of this? [i.e. Bartleby's refusal to proof-read copy] Am I not right?"

"With submission, sir," said Turkey, with his blandest tone, "I think that you are."

"Nippers," said I, "what do *you* think of it?"

"I think I should kick him out of the office."

Certainly their moods shift with the stylized grace of a Morris dance—on this occasion [i. e. morning] Turkey is as tranquil as Nippers is frenetic. Subsequent confrontations about the reluctant Bartleby reverse the poles. Only Ginger Nut, the office errand boy, has a view which does not change: "I think, sir, he's a little *lunny*"

Naturally the lawyer cannot accept such a simplistic (however accurate) view of Bartleby, despite his need for even Ginger Nut's assurance. "*Lunny*" is, after all, hardly a sophisticated and/or ingenious way of accounting for the pale scrivener's psychology. But to deduce a theory of vegetarian/ginger-nut psychodynamics—ah, that is a Bartleby (and a causation) of quite another stripe:

He lives, then, on ginger-nuts, thought I; never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian then; but no; he never eats even vegetables, he eats nothing but ginger-nuts. My mind then ran on in reveries concerning the probable effects upon the human constitution of living entirely on ginger-nuts. Ginger-nuts are so called because they contain ginger as one of their peculiar constituents, and the final flavouring one. Now what was ginger? A hot spicy thing. Was Bartleby hot and spicy? Not at all. Ginger, then, had no effect upon Bartleby. Probably he preferred it should have none.

Such "logic" betrays a sensibility bent on reducing the enigmatic to the manageable. Language can only function as a *cul de sac* where a phenomenon like Bartleby is concerned; once again, Melville's comic tone

tells us more about the lawyer's limited sensibilities than it does about the object of his scrutiny. And, yet, the lawyer persists. No matter how much a Bartleby might "prefer not" being defined, Melville's narrator is obsessed with *definition*.

The Sophoclean ironies that result from such crossed purposes are foreshadowed early: "To befriend Bartleby; to humour him in his strange wilfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience." Befriending a Bartleby, is, of course, a dangerous and very costly business. As the innocent lawyer soon discovers, it requires more than merely carrying a skittish employee on the pay-roll or disrupting an already tenuous office routine. Rather, it is to risk daily exposure to a nihilism so complete that normal life—with its normal illusions and vanities—is no longer possible.

For example, one Sunday morning the lawyer happens to stop into his Wall Street office, only to discover that Bartleby has assumed squatter's rights. The desolate scene inspires the following gush of purple prose, suitably sprinkled with classical sound and fury:

His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible! Think of it. Of a Sunday, Wall Street is deserted as Petra; and every night of every day is an emptiness . . . And here Bartleby makes his home; sole spectator of a solitude which he has seen all populous—a sort of innocent and transformed Marius brooding among the ruins of Carthage!

What the bombast leaves out, of course, is that this is a loneliness both Bartleby and the narrator share. After all, the narrator, too, spends his Sundays alone. In something like the unconscious motivation associated with primal scene fantasies, the lawyer "accidentally" discovers his lonely alter-ego. The difference, however, is that the lawyer resists what such an initiation might teach. Language serves as a means to both falsify (sentimentalize?) the experience and reinforce the barriers between Bartleby and himself.

Granted, the seeds of curiosity have been sown. But while the narrator might escalate the *degree* of his concern, it remains depressingly similar in *kind*. By this I mean, the lawyer continues to believe that human behavior is rational, that, with the right information, he can understand Bartleby at last:

"Will you tell me, Bartleby, where you were born?"

"I would prefer not to."

"Will you tell me *anything* about yourself?"

"I would prefer not to."

Unlike the lawyer, Bartleby appreciates the power of silence. His rule—like that of the Delphic oracle—is a simple one: Never too much.

But if Bartleby lingers on as a noncooperative mystery, his impact—i. e., on the lawyer-narrator and the law firm—is all too clear. "Prefer," for example, gets picked up as a grim office joke:

"*Prefer not*, eh?" gritted Nippers—"I'd *prefer* him, if I were you, sir," addressing me—"I'd *prefer* him; I'd give him his preferences, the stubborn mule! What is it, sir, pray, that he prefers not to do now?"

Bartleby moved not a limb.

"Mr. Nippers," I said, "I'd prefer that you would withdraw for the present."

Worse, people *outside* the office begin talking—or, at least, that is what the obsessed lawyer imagines. In short, the consensus reality about Bartleby also has a "preference."

Appropriate action must be taken—Bartleby must be dismissed. But as the lawyer soon discovers: "The great point was, not whether I had assumed that he would quit me, but whether he would prefer so to do. He was more a man of preferences than assumptions." *Assumptions*, of course, depend upon a world where causes lead to predictable effects; you fire an employee—he then leaves your office. Bartleby's "preferences" destroy that fragile fabric by substituting a highly personal reality for the one others live within:

"Will you, or will you not, quit me?" I now demanded in a sudden passion, advancing close to him.

"I would prefer *not* to quit you," he replied, gently emphasizing the *not*.

"What earthly right have you to stay here? Do you pay rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?"

He answered nothing.

Even selected readings in predestination ("Edwards on the Will"; "Priestly on Necessity") are to no avail. In something like a direct proportion, the lawyer's obsession to *know* about Bartleby (i. e., to label his bizarre behavior) increases as the whispered rumors about this curious employee spread along Wall Street. The impossible situation reaches its crescendo when the lawyer decides that moving his office (rather than Bartleby) is the better part of valor.

One is hardly surprised when this frantic escape to a newer, larger office does not work. The psychological cords which bind the lawyer to Bartleby may have been woven from interlocking strands of attraction/repulsion, but they retain a potency mere distance cannot remove. The lawyer feels a responsibility nearly as insidious as their relationship has been. One side of the coin speaks to his self-styled humanism, his sense of charity and fair play, while the other is bent upon bringing Bartleby into that circle of human beings defined by pragmatism and the preservation of the status quo. The result is a last-ditch effort at saving the self-destructive Bartleby; its form is that of desperate catechism:

"Now one of two things must take place. Either you must do something, or something must be done to you. Now what sort of business would you like to engage in? Would you like to re-engage in copying for some one?"

"I would prefer not to take a clerkship," he replied, as if to settle that little item at once.

"How would a bartender's business suit you? There is no trying of the eyesight in that."

"I would not like it at all; though, as I said before, I am not particular."

His unwonted wordiness inspired me. I returned to the charge.

"Well then, would you like to travel through the country collecting bills for the merchants? That would improve your health."

"No, I would prefer to be doing something else."

"How then would going as a companion to Europe to entertain some young gentleman with your conversation, —how would that suit you?"

"Not at all. It does strike me that there is anything definite about that. I like to be stationary. But I am not particular ... "

"Bartleby," said I, in the kindest tone I could assume under such exciting circumstances, "will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my dwelling—and remain there till we can conclude some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure. Come, let us start now, right away."

I have quoted this negative catechism at some length because the rhythm of practical solution and nihilistic refusal is crucial to an understanding of the story. Some human complexities cannot be radically reduced, however wellintentioned the advice. At a certain point Melville's comic tone intrudes upon the confrontation. Bartleby, for example, insists too much about not being "particular," while the lawyer suggests, in all seriousness, that a Bartleby "entertain" some young gentleman with his "conversation."

Moreover, the contrapuntal rhythms cited above have a Modernist parallel in Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers." Like Melville's lawyer, Nick Adams is a believer in practical solutions to existential problems. Ole Andreson's recurrent "no" in the face of imminent death provides that stark initiation which seems every American protagonist's fate. Adams's Innocence is, of course, suggested by his highly emblematic name. The anonymous lawyer of Melville's tale puts the matter more obliquely:

For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before I had never experienced aught but a notunpleasing sadness. The bond of common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam.

Confronted by Ole's utter resignation, Nick suggests alternatives which include "taking a powder," calling in the cops, fighting back and, finally, making a "deal." When his illusions are systematically destroyed—and Ole's death promises to become a brutal fact—Nick takes refuge in a final emotional summation: "It's too damned awful!"

Melville's lawyer, on the other hand, takes his solace in extravagant and falsifying rhetoric. Which is to say, if Bartleby steadfastly refuses to be reasonable in life, the lawyer can provide a missing rationale posthumously:

. . . Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office in Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in administration. When I think over this rumour I cannot adequately express the emotions which seize me. Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men . . . ? For by the carload they are annually burned. Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring: —the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity: —he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.

Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!

Like his ingenious theory about the effects of eating ginger-nuts, *rumors* about the Dead Letter Office provide the lawyer with a convenient platform on which to replace enigmatic silence with inflated language. But this time, of course, Bartleby cannot interfere, cannot "prefer" some other, more complicated, explanation of his

life. Death may well be the final barrier which human understanding cannot cross. And yet, as Bartleby puts it at the Tombs, "I know where I am." It is the lawyer whose rhetoric falsifies not only the strange compulsions which drive a Bartleby, but those which continue to affect him as well. Melville's vision is split into two voices—one incorporated in the exclamatory phrase "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" and the other which whispers about a darker humanity we cannot know in words.

Criticism: R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. (essay date 1975)

SOURCE: "'Bartleby' as Paradigm," in *The Method of Melville's Short Fiction*, Duke University Press, 1975, pp. 26-44.

[Bickley is an American educator and critic with a special interest in the work of Herman Melville and Joel Chandler Harris. In the following excerpt, he provides an overview of "Bartleby, the Scrivener," noting the influence of Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne on the story's style, structure, and themes.]

Technique and biography cannot be kept entirely separate in examining "Bartleby, the Scrivener. A Story of Wall-Street" (*Putnam's*, Nov., Dec. 1853); Melville's shift to magazine-writing, however his earlier work may have prepared him for it, was largely precipitated by circumstances. *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* had not done well, and Melville seemed to lack the psychic and aesthetic energy to write another novel. . . . In October [1852] he was invited to contribute to Putnam's new magazine, and the possibility of earning income by the page seemed especially attractive. Then, in November, he visited Hawthorne and [the tentative plans for a story entitled "Agatha" came up in discussion]. Additionally, and this fact has not been given special attention, Melville acquired two volumes of Irving's works in June, 1853, just before he began writing "Bartleby."

Of these several circumstances, the most significant for my study is that two accomplished writers of short fiction were present at the birth of Melville's first magazine story. . . . Melville had had several years of preparation for his new art form and would always bring his own literary predispositions to bear on it. Yet he was ever dependent upon his sources, too, from Ellis's *Polynesian Researches* to Shakespeare, in the novels; in writing his short stories he consulted Irving and Hawthorne, and with some frequency. Irving's presence is chiefly felt in the narrative technique of "Bartleby" and Hawthorne's in the story's metaphysical dimensions. Also, both writers appear to have contributed considerably to Melville's method of characterization. These influences came together in a rather complex way.

The story seems to have owed its initial form and narrative design to the example of Irving. Melville had consciously or unconsciously been under Irving's influence for several years (Evert Duyckinck once felt that Melville began his career by modeling his writing on Irving's), even though he had, for rhetorical purposes, undercut Irving's significance as a writer in his review of the *Mosses* and in a complimentary letter on Hawthorne. No New York man of letters could avoid breathing in a little of Irving with the atmosphere, and [Melville's characters] Tommo, Omoo, Redburn, and White-Jacket were all to some degree Crayonesque "sketchers" on tour. In addition, as William Hedges notes [in *Washington Irving: An American Study, 1802-1832*, 1965], Irving influenced *Mardi*, and there are strains of "gothic risibility" and Knickerbockerism in the "conceited" prose of Ishmael.

Melville acquired the two volumes of Irving's works in the summer of 1853, and it seems likely that he was rereading Irving during the next three years. The rhetorical design and narrative strategy of several of Melville's tales parallel Irving's, and Crayon and his storytelling acquaintances are, it would appear, models for at least five of Melville's short story protagonists. It seems that Irving's example reinforced Melville's own best tendencies in first-person narration, and the new magazinist would have had reason to look to the older writer for short story ideas and form. The basic similarities between Irving's and Melville's tales are in matters of narrative perspective. Essentially, the "bachelor" is the controlling consciousness in Irving, as he was in

Melville's novels and would continue to be, with some interesting variations, in his tales. As storyteller within the framing devices of *Bracebridge Hall* and *Tales of a Traveller* (where, characteristically, a dinner-table acquaintance of Crayon's reads a manuscript or recounts an adventure first-or secondhand), or as Crayon himself in *The Sketch Book*, the bachelor-observer senses his estrangement from the world and lingers as a nonparticipant on the fringes of life. Prone to sentiment, both real and affected, and even to mild neurosis, Irving's sketchers often ironically reveal more about themselves than about the external reality they pretend to describe.

Melville, following up his instincts and earlier narrative strategies, modifies and expands the Crayonesque proto-type in his magazine works. The first-person narrator acquires the rhetorical stature of an authentic protagonist who enters into the action of the sketch-become-tale rather than remaining outside, as observer or as teller of a story involving someone else. In other words, Melville deemphasizes Irving's often cumbersome framing devices and allows his narrators to tell their own stories. Compared to Irving's, his method is at once more dramatic and rhetorically demanding of the reader: it multiplies the possibilities for irony, making the narrator's moods and attitudes an emotional and intellectual grid through or around which the reader must, in Jamesian terms, "see."

These patterns are at work in "Bartleby." The lawyernarrator is a Crayonesque sketcher who enjoys storytelling and could, if he pleased, "relate divers histories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep." Conservative, and himself a sentimentalist, the lawyer anticipates the narrative personae in several stories, "I and My Chimney," "Jimmy Rose," and "The Paradise of Bachelors." He insists on telling his reader about Bartleby, who was the "strangest" scrivener he ever saw. However, in acknowledging at the outset the difficulty of the task he has set for himself, for "no materials exist, for a full and satisfactory biography of this man," the narrator hints at one of the central ironies of the story: he will never succeed in "characterizing" Bartleby. The scrivener's personality, inner drives, and sensibilities will remain relatively unknown quantities to the narrator. The lawyer's character sketch is, in effect, a series of attempts to align or harmonize his clerk with something he himself knows or can respond to, and these attempts continually fail. Although the lawyer never realizes it, the "chief character . . . to be presented" will not be Bartleby, but himself.

Aside from its general method, "Bartleby" may also owe its particular generic form to Irving. As an extended anecdote about an idiosyncratic law clerk, the story bears a resemblance to the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century sketches of character published in the periodicals. More particularly, John Seelye suggests [in "The Contemporary 'Bartleby,'" *American Transcendental Quarterly* 7, Summer, 1970], Melville responded to Putnam's invitation to write magazine pieces by turning to the popular tradition of the "mysterious stranger" tale, which originated in America with Irving's "The Little Man in Black" (*Salmagundi*). Although Hawthorne and Poe also contributed to the genre prior to 1853 ("Wakefield," 1834, and "The Man of the Crowd," 1840), Seelye contends that the delineation of the various responses by villagers to Irving's silent stranger and the "tag-end" explanation of the Little Man's origins were patterns imitated in "Bartleby."

There are, however, even more substantial similarities between Melville's tale and another story which Seelye ascribes, in passing, to the genre: "The Adventure of the Mysterious Stranger" in *Tales of a Traveller*. Irving's tale is related to Crayon in the first person by an Englishman, who had met the subject of his story in Venice. He was a young Italian, physically similar to Bartleby in his pallor, emaciation, and haggardness of brow, who kept to himself yet who for an unknown reason needed to be near people. To the narrator the young man appears "tormented by some strange fancy or apprehension" and was afflicted with a "devouring melancholy." Inexplicably, the morose Italian chooses the narrator as a companion, as Bartleby does the lawyer, but remains uncommunicative about his troubles, commenting only that he needs sympathy but cannot talk with his befriender.

The Englishman tries to reason the Italian out of his melancholia, but to no avail: he "seemed content to carry his load of misery in silence, and only sought to carry it by my side. There was a mute beseeching manner about him, as if he craved companionship as a charitable boon." As the story progresses, the silent sufferer begins to have the same kind of effect upon Irving's indulgent narrator that the withdrawn scrivener would have upon Melville's "charitable" lawyer, yet neither man is capable of turning away the afflicted creature who seems to need his companionship. Observes Irving's narrator: "I felt this melancholy to be infectious. It stole over my spirits; interfered with all my gay pursuits, and gradually saddened my life; yet I could not prevail upon myself to shake off a being who seemed to hang upon me for support." Melville's lawyer responds similarly when he discovers that Bartleby had been sleeping in the office at night: "For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. . . . The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy!"

Irving's mysterious stranger eventually disappears. Characteristic of Mr. Knickerbocker's reliance on the story-within-a-story, however, he leaves his benefactor a manuscript which (in the next tale of a traveler) explains his history: he had murdered an unprincipled rival suitor and was fleeing the authorities. For reasons that will be discussed below, Melville leaves Bartleby's story essentially untold, although he does throw an Irvingesque sop to the common reader in the form of a "sequel." Irving had helped Melville find a structure for his first magazine tale and had offered him a compelling narrative strategy to build upon. Melville saw that he could multiply the thematic and rhetorical possibilities of his tale by involving the reader psychologically in the narrator's repeated experiences with a "mysterious" stranger. As in Irving's tale, no single encounter of lawyer and clerk is sufficient to explain the enigmas of Bartleby's character, and if the narrator's vision remains incomplete, so, Melville implies, may the reader's.

While "The Adventure of the Mysterious Stranger" seems to have provided a pattern for Melville to follow, Bartleby is a more intense and suggestive character than Irving's romantically melancholic figure; there seem to be stronger influences from another quarter. Melville claims in *The Confidence-Man* that "original" characters are usually observable "in town," and there is considerable evidence to suggest that Melville turned to that skeptical and taciturn friend from nearby Lenox, with whom he had just shared the Agatha story, as he composed the portrait of Bartleby. If Melville's first short story is his most compelling tale, perhaps it is because when he wrote it he was haunted by the image of Nathaniel Hawthorne and by one of Hawthorne's most powerful themes, withdrawal and isolation.

As a nay-sayer, Bartleby is philosophically reminiscent of, and perhaps to some extent based upon, those protagonists in Hawthorne's gloomier short fiction whom critics have viewed as portraits of the artist, and in whose alienation is symbolized Hawthorne's own skeptical retreat. Goodman Brown's capitulation to pessimism and despair over the human condition, Parson Hooper's incommunicative withdrawal behind his mask, and Wakefield's more impish perversity synthesize in Bartleby, another alienated hero. Philosophically, in "Bartleby" and, with varying emphases, in later stories as well, Melville seems to have confronted anew the implications of Hawthorne's perception of "blackness." In this first story, however, he defined the ultimate extension of a Hawthornean world-view: a self-willed death. Bartleby, unlike Agatha, finally capitulates to the suffering he has experienced and to his skepticism about the possibilities for human understanding and love.

In commenting upon *The House of the Seven Gables* in a letter to Hawthorne in April 1851, Melville creates an image of both the novel and its author. He writes that the book is like a "fine old chamber" in one corner of which there is "a dark little black-letter volume in golden clasps, entitled 'Hawthorne: A Problem.'" Bartleby, a symbol of that "certain tragic phase of humanity" that Melville saw embodied in Hawthorne and in his fiction as well, is also "A Problem" and a black-letter study. Hawthorne said "No! in thunder," and, Melville adds, "all men who say yes, lie"; to the same effect Bartleby states "I would prefer not to." The scrivener declines to adopt the distorted values and dehumanizing strictures of the outside world, and his soft-spoken refusal to join the ordinary course of life carries a strength of conviction equal to Hawthorne's emphatic "No!" Bartleby may speak for Hawthorne but he also speaks for mankind, and, true to his problematical nature, he

whispers two different messages. Representing those who would "prefer not" to commit themselves to a meaningless way of life, he is a stoical study in what Melville terms in his story "passive resistance"; but through him Melville also warns humanity against a selfdestructive surrender to a vision of blackness.

Melville may have begun his tale as a parable of his own encounters with Hawthorne and his writings, but he used with brilliant effect a sentimental "sketcher" of somewhat limited perception to broaden the psychological and symbolical dimensions of his story. For the unnamed narrator comes to represent any man who, forced at last to question the assumptions and values he has always lived by, hesitates to admit to himself and to his readers that he faces a crisis at all; who, pushed beyond the limits of his own understanding and humanity, rationalizes his failings.

The first of Melville's short fiction "bachelors," the lawyer begins his story with an Irvingesque "author's account of himself." This opening sketch serves two rhetorical functions. It reveals the lawyer to be something of a sentimentalist, interested in conveying to his reader what he believes will be poignant impressions of his own personal "involvement" in his strange scrivener's life. Secondly, and more important, the self-portrait discloses how inextricably bound up the lawyer is in the material world.

The ethic that informs the narrator's life style, and too often his judgment as well, is that of free-enterprise capitalism. However, the narrator is not an ambitious lawyer; a man of "peace," he is content to do a "snug" business among rich men's bonds and mortgages, in the "cool tranquillity" of his "snug retreat" on Wall Street. His hero, and former client, is the late John Jacob Astor, a name that, he admits with a flourish, "I love to repeat; for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion." Astor had once commended him for his "prudence" and "method," yet in bragging that his associates consider him "an eminently *safe* man," the lawyer unwittingly suggests that inside knowledge about even financially shady deals would be secure with him.

A telling sign of his prudent but always utilitarian approach to his world is the office routine itself. He is willing to indulge the idiosyncrasies of Turkey and Nippers so long as they are, at least during half of each working day, "useful" to him. Thus, while Bartleby continues with his copying, although he may "prefer not" to follow certain orders, his employer keeps him on as a "useful" servant (the narrator will employ the word again when he introduces Bartleby to the "useful" grub-man in the prison). When the scrivener gives up copying, however, and his uselessness begins to interfere with the "method" of the lawyer's office, Bartleby constitutes a threat.

The rhythmic pattern of events prior to Bartleby's inevitable dismissal makes up the story's essential form: from the introductory self-portrait to the page-long "sequel" concerning the scrivener's earlier work in the Dead Letter Office occur approximately a dozen confrontations between the employer and his clerk. Melville's structure is rhetorically quite effective. It enables him to exhibit several distinctive responses to the enigma of Bartleby, none of which succeeds in revealing his character. Thus the levels of available meaning are multiplied, and the reader is left free to identify with any, or none, of the lawyer's emotional and mental reactions to his scrivener. Melville would find this method useful later, in the encounters of narrators and "original" characters in "The Fiddler," "The Lightning-Rod Man," and "Benito Cereno," for example. Melville's rhetorical strategy dictates that no interpretation of Bartleby offered by the lawyer could ever be complete, for the scrivener is a phenomenon totally alien to the narrator's experience and sensibilities. Yet the story raises an even larger rhetorical question. The lawyer may have his limitations, but does not Melville also suggest that Bartleby is incapable of giving enough of his own self to deserve even that charity which his employer extends?

Where does the moral or ethical emphasis of the tale rest, finally? In the best Ishmaelian tradition, Melville offers no neat answers.

Among his dozen or so confrontations with the scrivener, six of the lawyer's encounters are crucial in terms of method and meaning. Melville seeks at the initial stage of employer-employee interaction to identify the reader with the lawyer's perspective, for purposes of immediacy and veri-similitude; quickly, however, Melville tests the readernarrator relationship by skewing the lawyer's angle of perception.

Thus, at Bartleby's first preference not to perform some routine clerical tasks, the narrator is portrayed as baffled and stunned, as almost anyone would be. With the second round of Bartleby's preference-stating, however, a measurable amount of separation takes place between lawyer and reader. The lawyer decides, with a certain logic but with a recognizable degree of self-congratulation, that because Bartleby is "useful" to him he should befriend his clerk; in so doing he could "purchase a delicious self-approval" for his conscience. The lawyer's studied selfrighteousness gives way to what he claims to be a disturbing if not a painful awareness of Bartleby's spiritual condition, in the third phase of the encounters. He is surprised to find one Sunday that Bartleby has been sleeping in the office at night, solitary and companionless; but how authentic or sincere is the narrator's recounting of his discovery?

Immediately then the thought came sweeping across me, what miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible! Think of it. Of a Sunday, Wall Street is deserted as Petra; and every night of every day it is an emptiness. This building, too, which of week-days hums with industry and life, at nightfall echoes with sheer vacancy, and all through Sunday is forlorn. And here Bartleby makes his home; sole spectator of a solitude which he has seen all populous—a sort of innocent and transformed Marius brooding among the ruins of Carthage!

The lawyer has a felicitous turn of phrase, but his effusiveness is over-elegant and melodramatic—more appropriate to a romantic sketcher of "fine sentiments," trying to appeal to his audience, than to a sensitive perceiver of human need.

"A fraternal melancholy!" exclaims the lawyer as he contemplates Bartleby's loneliness. "For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam." Just as the reader is beginning to ask how much real communion there is in a fit of sympathetic melancholia, the narrator's mood passes. When he recalls forlorn Bartleby's "pallid haughtiness" and his habit of staring incommunicatively upon the dead brick wall outside his window, the lawyer feels "melancholy merge into fear" and "pity into repulsion." In attempting to account for this shift the protagonist says, defensively, "They err who would assert that invariably this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart." After all, "it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach." Of course this is precisely the point; the lawyer seeks on the next morning to "reach" Bartleby's soul in a commonsense fashion—by asking him questions about himself—failing to understand that an uncommon Bartleby who prefers to say nothing about himself cannot be so easily plumbed.

In the fourth confrontation, the lawyer's rational analysis of his clerk's behavior and its effects reinforces what his emotional responses had told him. He realizes that both he and his other assistants have, unconsciously, got in the habit of using the word "prefer," and he knows now that he must surely dismiss this "demented man" who is affecting them all in a "mental way." The scrivener's decision to do no more copying provides the lawyer his excuse, and he gives Bartleby six days to leave.

Up to this point Melville has portrayed his enigmatic scrivener from a narrative perspective that has undergone several reorientations. Initially, the lawyer is simply perplexed by Bartleby's behavior, nothing more; then he looks at his clerk from the standpoint of selfrighteousness, again as would a self-styled victim of melancholia, and yet again as a utilitarian rationalist. These four stances do not assist in revealing the "true" Bartleby to the lawyer, nor are they meant to; Bartleby is simply not going to make himself available for revelation.

In the fifth confrontation the scrivener undergoes metaphysical analysis, although the metaphysics is only rhetorical tomfoolery on Melville's part. From behind the persona of his narrator he toys with the reader for two full pages using a very large pun on the Doctrine of the Assumption, the Catholic belief that the Virgin Mary ascended into Heaven on August 15. Having given Bartleby severance pay, the lawyer assumes that he would now leave. "I *assumed* the ground that depart he must," recalls the lawyer, "and upon that assumption built all I had to say." But the narrator is "thunderstruck" six days later to find Bartleby still there. Characteristically, his response is melodramatic and exaggerated: ". . . I stood like the man who, pipe in mouth, was killed one cloudless afternoon long ago in Virginia, by summer lightning; at his own warm open window he was killed, and remained leaning out there upon the dreamy afternoon, till some one touched him, when he fell." Melville's punning on the Assumption grows explicit:

What was to be done? or, if nothing could be done, was there anything further that I could *assume* in the matter? Yes, as before I had prospectively assumed that Bartleby would depart, so now I might retrospectively assume that departed he was. . . . I might enter my office in a great hurry, and pretending not to see Bartleby at all, walk straight against him as if he were air. . . . It was hardly possible that Bartleby could withstand such an application of the doctrine of assumptions. But upon second thoughts the success of the plan seemed rather dubious.

Dubious indeed, for Bartleby is Bartleby, not the risen Virgin Mary. Further along, Melville makes one last punning reference to the metaphysical question of Bartleby's power to transcend this mortal sphere. Still baffled by the clerk's continuing presence in the office, the lawyer demands: "What earthly right have you to stay here?"

Melville's pun on the Assumption is but one of several *jeux-de-mots* and witty asides in "Bartleby." The humorous dimensions of the story are an essential part of its surprising fullness and complexity of texture; the reader enjoys the Dickensian idiosyncrasies of Turkey and Nippers and laughs at the narrator for his sentimentality and propensity to over-dramatize his own plight, but the humor ceases when Bartleby's fate begins to close in on him.

The last important confrontation between lawyer and clerk raises the moral and theological questions that Melville was most concerned with in his story. Angry that the scrivener has achieved a "cadaverous triumph" over him, the lawyer is just barely able to contain what he now finds to be almost murderous thoughts about Bartleby. Luckily, he acts in accordance with his previously advertised virtue of prudence, and he recalls the charitable commandment "that ye love one another." Comforting himself during the next few days by reading "Edwards on the Will" and "Priestley on Necessity," he is nearly convinced that "Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like me to fathom." But the narrator's Christian charity and faith capitulate to human pride and a slightly paranoid imbalance. His professional acquaintances criticize him for retaining in his chambers an odd vagrant who does absolutely no work, and the lawyer's imagination—more neurotic than melodramatic now—projects a lurid scene:

And as the idea came upon me of [Bartleby's] possibly turning out a long-lived man, and keep occupying my chambers, and denying my authority; and perplexing my visitors; and scandalizing my professional reputation; and casting a general gloom over the premises; keeping soul and body together to the last upon his savings (for doubtless he spent but half a dime a day), and in the end perhaps outlive me, and claim possession of my office by right of his perpetual occupancy: as all these dark anticipations crowded upon me more and more . . . a great change was wrought in me. I resolved to gather all my faculties together, and forever rid me of this intolerable incubus.

Yet his mood would shift again. The dismayed narrator is still essentially a "man of peace," incapable of physically ejecting Bartleby and hesitant to summon the police. Instead, he moves his entire office elsewhere, and, "strange to say—I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of."

The lawyer is baffled by his scrivener because he is conditioned by the method of his profession and his life. Although one faults the protagonist for his blindness, Bartleby might, after all, have affected anyone as he did the narrator. [In "Melville's Comedy of Faith," *ELH* 27, December, 1960, William Bysshe Stein] contends that the lawyer cannot "involve himself emotionally" in the isolation of Bartleby, because the effort would entail "too great a strain upon his capacity for love and pity." And so, perhaps, with the reader. However, the lawyer's postseparation guilt and uncertainty about his lack of meaningful involvement only reinforce our image of his ineffectuality. Able to put up with occasional troublesome quirks in his office workers so long as they perform their duties, the lawyer fails when the humane indulgences that Bartleby seemed to seek grow too taxing. When his former land-lord sends word that he must do something about the man he abandoned, the frustrated lawyer literally denies his scrivener thrice—in effect betraying him into the hands of the authorities. His denials make him feel guilty, but his eleventh-hour efforts at the prison to provide for his clerk, his offers of lodging and a job and his paying for meals that Bartleby prefers not to eat, come too late. In his three most emphatic and resolute statements Bartleby tells his one-time employer, "I know you," "I want nothing to say to you," and "I know where I am."

As a "reward" for his puzzled readers and as a gesture by which he hopes to clear himself of any accusations of irresponsibility and uncharitableness towards Bartleby, the lawyer passes along "one little item of rumor" as a possible explanation of his scrivener's strange personality. Bartleby's experiences in the Washington Dead Letter Office had apparently convinced him that all life held was deprivation and despair—thus his pitiable forlornness.

Yet Melville would not so easily explain away the scrivener, nor so readily pardon the narrator. Surely there are more significant meanings latent in Bartleby's insistent use of the word "prefer" and in the walls he seems to identify with. During one of their encounters the narrator tested the extent of his scrivener's perversity by asking him to run an errand to the Post Office (probably the last place, if the rumor is correct, that Bartleby would ever want to go). The scrivener gives his standard reply, "I would prefer not to." "You *will* not?" demands the lawyer; "I *prefer* not," answers Bartleby (italics Melville's). The lawyer, characteristically, offers no meaningful interpretive commentary on this crucial distinction, but for the modern reader the sequence is an intriguing prefiguration of the existential dilemma. In "Bartleby" Melville portrays not only an obsessive Hawthornean vision of blackness, but also an image of one man's confrontation with what he feels to be the meaninglessness of the universe. Ahab had spoken of an "unreasoning force," inexorably in control of all nature, that denies man both identity and power. There is no possibility of meaningful action, Bartleby seems to say, and it is certain that man cannot successfully will anything. Perhaps the only tenable stance is merely to *prefer* to do something; this gives one at least a temporary hedge against fate, and somehow it is not quite so painful if one's "preferences" are denied. Bartleby never says "I *will* not," and the lawyer, habitually an avoider of conflicts and a postponer of decisions until his "leisure," never pushes his clerk beyond his preferences. At one point in the story the lawyer explains how difficult it was for him to put up with all those "peculiarities, privileges, and unheard-of exemptions" of Bartleby's, failing to realize that the "exemptions" Bartleby enjoyed were not of the clerk's making, but of his own.

Melville suggests that all man can choose to do is to endure and to state his wishes, although there are always hazards in making an obsession out of preferring. For if the lawyer errs in judgment, so does Bartleby in preferring to attach himself to one whom he, for some reason, has chosen to be his companion in his isolation ("I would prefer *not* to quit you," the scrivener tells his employer late in the story). Does Bartleby, the almost catatonic isolato who seems deathly afraid of even being brushed against by a fellow clerk, have the right to expect comfort or companionship from a person with whom he is incapable of sharing even the smallest modicum of his inner self? Unlike Ahab, Bartleby has neither strength nor will to aggress through the walls

which hedge him in, a prisoner, and the lawyer's desertion is for the clerk like the final turning of the key in the lock. Indeed, Bartleby seems voluntarily to have made himself a prisoner of the walls he sees, perhaps because they, alone, do not make any demands on his privacy.

The scrivener, suggests Henry Murray, used silence and immobility to defend his integrity, but in the process he became alienated and a misanthrope ["Bartleby and I," in *Melville Annual 1965, a Symposium: "Bartleby the Scrivener,"* edited by Howard P. Vincent, 1966]. Thus, he dies alone and in a manner appropriate to his fundamental preference to remain separate: he prefers, finally, not to eat and dies with his head resting on the cold prison stones, rather than on humanity's pillow.

As Melville experimented with aesthetic distance and narrative form in his magazine fiction he returned frequently to two basic narrative personae: that of the genial, sentimental anecdotist who enjoys painting sketches of character or social settings, or writing familiar essays about himself, and that of the ironic protagonist who, in a sense, becomes the victim of his own story. Works in the first category include "Jimmy Rose" and "I and My Chimney," while "The Fiddler" and "Cock-A-Doodle-Do!" feature the second type of narrative pose. "Bartleby" is paradigmatically significant because it illustrates both basic narrative postures: the lawyer is genial and an engaging anecdotist, but he is at the same time an ironic figure of incomplete perceptions. None of Melville's stories is free of rhetorical irony, and hence, as "Bartleby" would suggest, one should not force distinctions between "sentimental" narrative and "ironic" narrative too far.

Criticism: Thomas P. Joswick (essay date 1978)

SOURCE: "The 'Incurable Disorder' in 'Bartleby the Scrivener,'" in *Delta*, England, Vol. 6, May, 1978, pp. 79-93.

[In the essay below, Joswick compares thematic aspects of "Bartleby the Scrivener" to those of Melville's controversial novel *Pierre*.]

"Pray leave me; who was ever cured by talk?"

Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man*

"Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" was Melville's first publication following what the majority of contemporary reviewers considered his most disastrous and blasphemous novel. Because of that scathing critical condemnation of *Pierre*, which included suggestions of insanity about its author, many twentieth-century readers have tried to resolve the enigmas of "Bartleby" by finding in this remarkable story a bitter commentary on Melville's fate as a writer in America. Such readings usually seek to identify Melville's career, or his estimate of it, with Bartleby's, arguing that Bartleby's occupation, and the rewards he received from it, are a sarcastic parody of the literary trials and compensations Melville endured and received for *Pierre*. While these interpretations do acknowledge that "Bartleby" is a response to *Pierre*, even a response directed toward a literary situation, their biographical bias nonetheless tends to obscure what interesting correlations the two share as adjacent works in Melville's canon. The connections between *Pierre* and "Bartleby" are more compelling than any biographical reading can indicate, for there is a certain, if yet inadequately defined, thematic and temporal development in Melville's fiction, one that Melville himself frequently indicated in his letters. He suggested at one time, for example, that his writing was like the continuous unfolding of a plant toward a blighted center, and we might do well to follow that analogy and read "Bartleby" as a sort of fruitless blossoming in Melville's fiction—not a fulfillment or a replenishing repetition of the promising seed, but a peeling away to expose a disease at the center. If in *Pierre* Melville strikes—in the words of one reviewer—"with an impious [. . .] hand at the very foundations of society," he continues that unmasking of origins in "Bartleby," revealing through the unassuming prose of the narrator the

inherent disorder at the center of man's social, as well as literary, purpose.

The images of disease to situate "Bartleby" in Melville's canon are particularly apt, for the story itself centers on what is assumed to be Bartleby's "innate and incurable disorder." Moreover, the plot unfolds around the repeated failures of the narrator to accommodate that disorder in his own life, let alone to "cure" it by any of his rationalistic means. The lawyer has been comically tolerant of the stomach ailments and alcoholic intemperance of Nippers and Turkey, and for a short time, because he believes his new scrivener's "eccentricities are [also] involuntary," he is able to make use of the "incurably forlorn" Bartleby. Even in refusals, his new employee is deferential, and so the lawyer can pronounce him "a valuable acquisition." Yet because his initial assumption about Bartleby's "strange peculiarities" persist, the lawyer soon can no longer accommodate what he thinks must be Bartleby's "excessive and organic ill," and in a comic scene that I will discuss at the end of this paper, he begins to fear that Bartleby's "demented mind" is contagious—a sure sign of which is the lawyer's own "involuntary" use of the word "prefer." Never questioning then his assumptions about Bartleby's "disorder," nor ever quite understanding the severe limitations of his own attempts to manage or "cure" it, the narrator, at the end of the story, sadly repeats to the grub-man at the Tombs his belief that Bartleby is "a little deranged."

And so he might be. But any speculation along that line, interesting as it might become, would remain in collusion with the protective assumptions of the narrator, the most important of which, and the least recognized, concerns the nature of literature itself. The intentions indicated at the beginning and the sentimental sigh exhaled at the end make it clear that the story is the lawyer's final attempt, after his economic and Christian "self-interest" have failed, to make of Bartleby something "ordinarily human." In other words, the story anticipates an audience that will share an assumption about the curative power of literature, that by its ordering and faithful truth-telling, literary language might shield us from the disorder that threatens our certainties of self and society. And so it does, at least on the one level of reading—more penetrating than the narrator's own understanding of the case—that would accept Bartleby's presumed madness to be the extremity by which we measure our own humanity. According to this reading, Bartleby might be a kind of diminished and wasted Ahab, a tragic and diseased measure of humanity, from whom the reader is protected, however, by a fictive world where the sharks glide by "as if with padlocks on their mouths." Yet the comparison to *Moby-Dick* is inadequate, for in both *Pierre* and "Bartleby" the shielding power of fiction is less certain than it is for Ishmael. In fact, in *Pierre* the literary act becomes as contaminated as the hero's, the narrator forced to become a "canting showman," a tortured member in the "guild of self-imposters." And while "Bartleby" lacks the painful self-consciousness of *Pierre*, it too is another case in which the literary act not only fails to cure or cover the disorder that grounds human experience, but in itself it reenacts the disorder or disease we would pretend to be shielded from.

Because he has little of the self-reflection of *Pierre's* narrator, the lawyer himself does not glimpse the complicity his writing creates in the disorder his story-telling is intended to cure, just as he is morally blind to the complicity his Christian virtues of "self-interest" have in his three times denial of a Christ-like Bartleby. As a writer his method is simply to render faithfully what his own "astonished eyes saw of Bartleby," and to describe the environment of walls that eventually paralyze Bartleby, without ever, in either case, accurately interpreting what is there. Marred as it is by his obtuseness, the lawyer's declared method of truth-telling nonetheless shares the intentions of many Melvillean narrators, that "an anxious desire to speak the unvarnished truth will gain for him the confidence of his readers." More happens, however, to those apparently honest intentions in "Bartleby" than in Melville's first fiction, where those intentions were initially examined. As I have tried to show elsewhere, the narrator's desires in *Typee* are subverted by the hero's undermining the foundations of self and society during his quest for origins in the exotic South Sea islands. In "Bartleby," the writer's intentions to gain the confidence of his readers lead to a literary bond that joins writer and reader in the very disorder that establishes human experience.

The connection between literature and origins may be found in the first paragraph of the story. After a slightly self-congratulatory note on the originality of his story, the lawyer introduces the subject of his tale by lamenting two significant losses. While of other scribes he might write the complete life, no materials exist for a "full and satisfactory biography" of Bartleby. "It is," the lawyer says, "an irreparable loss to literature." That loss is explained by a prior one—a loss of origins. "Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and, in his case, those are very small." Indeed, all we know from the "original sources" is Bartleby's own enigmatic preference not to. The initial situation of the story, consequently, is such that lacking certain knowledge of origin, or finding only a deferential refusal and negation of origin, the lawyer cannot provide a totalizing history, one that assures us of origin and purpose, for the simulacrum of such a history—the literary biography—has been pre-empted. In other words, the "irreparable loss to literature" that the lawyer laments implies the loss of a teleological form to literature—a loss so poorly supplemented in this story by the sequel with which it ends. Instead of satisfactorily completing the lawyer's history, the sequel only renews our questions about those "original sources" that might authenticate a providential or purposeful design for our tragically wayward humanity.

Different though it is from Melville's earlier fiction, the lawyer's literary situation is not new, for by virtue of the losses I have mentioned, he shares a writer's dilemma with Pierre and *Pierre's* narrator. One example must be sufficient for my argument here. After his first interview with Isabel, Pierre's sense of his own history is challenged enough that he comes to reject "all the speculative lies" that gave form to those novels which he had initially imitated to create a "providential" heritage and destiny. "Like all youths, Pierre had conned his novel-lessons; [. . .] but their false, inverted attempts at systematizing eternally unsystemizable elements; their audacious, intermeddling impotency, in trying to unravel, and spread out, and classify, the more thin than gossamer threads which make up the complex web of life; these things over Pierre had no power now." The loss to literature of an imitated teleology derives for Pierre from a loss of an ascertainable origin, and that double loss makes his own history irredeemably confused. More importantly for my purpose, however, the double loss also engenders a new form for literature:

He saw that human life doth truly come from that, which all men are agreed to call by the name of *God*; and that it partakes of the unravelable inscrutableness of God. By infallible presentiment he saw, that not always doth life's beginning gloom conclude in gladness; [. . .] that while countless tribes of common novels laboriously spin veils of mystery, only to complacently clear them up at last; . . . yet the profounder emanations of the human mind, intended to illustrate all that can be humanly known of human life; these never unravel their own intricacies, and have no proper endings; but in imperfect, unanticipated, and disappointing sequels (as mutilated stumps), hurry to abrupt intermergings with the eternal tides of time and fate.

Though the lawyer's mind is by no means profound, his story is a fitting example of the literature Pierre describes: formally considered, its "disappointing sequel" is no "proper ending"; philosophically considered, the inability of the literary form to systematize the disorder of "eternally unsystemizable elements" derives from a loss of origin.

The lawyer's situation appears different from Pierre's, to be certain, for in the story the "inscrutableness" of origin concerns only Bartleby directly, not God. Yet by his contradiction of social and epistemological forms, the "motionless" scrivener casts into doubt as well the "all-wise Providence" whose natural or transcendent causation might explain a "predestinated purpose" of history. The lawyer's appeal to Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Priestly for their interpretations of divine agency is essentially no different than his appeal to other explanations about Bartleby. In all cases, appearances and assumptions, which also provide the rationale for the narrative itself, are hypostatized into "doctrines," and in all cases, Bartleby's preference not to dismisses belief in those "doctrines," not so much by pointing to a fuller truth underlying the surface, as by indicating an irrational disorder within the seeming certainties of the orderly human institutions. "Do you not see the reason

for yourself?" Bartleby at one time challenges, for the explanation of his preference not to lies in what is apparent, not in what is mysterious. Bartleby's preference, in other words, does not indicate the impulse of a Dionysian will rejecting the apparent orders of life for a hidden, albeit negative, Truth underlying phenomena; what his preference does indicate is the disorder present in all the structures, literature included, by which man defines himself and his world.

Much of the ironic humor of the story depends on recognizing that disorder, especially at those times when the lawyer tries to define Bartleby by the institutional forms he is accustomed to. What he discovers is that Bartleby cannot be so defined, for he defies the logic of those forms. The lawyer tries, for example, to classify Bartleby by a legal logic, accounting Bartleby by all appearances to be a vagrant. But what kind of vagrant or wanderer is he, the lawyer asks himself, "who refuses to budge? It is because he will *not* be a vagrant, then, that you seek to count him *as* a vagrant. That is too absurd." And yet it is precisely on the charge of vagrancy, despite the absurdity of the legal and etymological definitions of the word applied to him, that Bartleby is imprisoned in the Tombs. It is important to remember, however, that the legal definition of Bartleby is only one of many contradictions or absurdities by which he is characterized, defined, and even figuratively imprisoned at times throughout the story. The lawyer is aware, for example, that Bartleby contradicts his expectations of physical responses, for Bartleby eats only "hot, spicy" ginger-nuts, but is himself neither hot nor spicy. Yet with unintentional irony, the lawyer also imagines that Bartleby initially "gorges himself on [his] documents," only, of course, to die of starvation at the end. The lawyer is also aware of Bartleby's reticence, yet compares him to Cicero, and later even suggests he become a traveling companion "to entertain some young gentleman with [his] conversation." In another interesting play of contraries, the lawyer frequently declares that he wishes Bartleby close to him only so he can feel more private. Yet when the lawyer identifies psychologically with his scrivener, he finds that Bartleby confuses the certainties of emotional responses, for he arouses pity and a sense of fraternal melancholy in the lawyer, only to have "melancholy merge into fear, that pity into repulsion." And finally and most significantly, the lawyer's suggestion of a religious affirmation of Bartleby at the end of the story is presented by a contradiction parallel to all the others in the story: dead, Bartleby now "lives without dining."

That final contradiction is essentially no different than others in the story, and it would be a mistake to radicalize it as the source and explanation, appealing to the Truth of a senseless organic unity might keep the form of a religious paradox, invert its content, and say: Bartleby, by a kind of negative mysticism, sees the hidden Truth by which this world is condemned to superficialities and lies; the Truth is mysterious and negative, while man's world is fashioned by appearances and ungrounded optimism. Such a solution, however, implies a metaphysics that proves inadequate for the story, if only because Melville had already examined and rejected a similar metaphysics in *Pierre*. In the novel, Isabel initially proposes such an explanation, appealing to the Truth of a senseless organic unity beneath the world's "superinduced superficialities." Isabel prefers the "far sweeter mysteries" of that hidden reality over any "surmises" or "assumptions" about reality, because "though the mystery be unfathomable," she says, "it is still the unfathomableness of fullness; but the surmise, that is but shallow and unmeaning emptiness." Her metaphysical dichotomies of mystery/surmise, fullness/emptiness, organic/artificial, and substance/shadow parallel those that appear later in Plinlimmon's pamphlet, which argues that the world's self-interested ethics derive from a contradictorily coherent metaphysics—a "meridional correspondence" between a true world and "an artificial world like ours." "Greenwich wisdom," Plinlimmon's ethical argument runs, may appear folly "in this remote Chinese world of ours," yet "it follows not from this, that God's truth is one thing and man's truth another; but [. . .] by their very contradiction they are made to correspond." In both cases there is an appealing metaphysical consolation—that our true life flows unimpaired beneath the artificial surface, or that the ethical and social contradictions of the human realm are defined and ultimately dissolved by the Truth of Providence. In both cases the artificial nature of human institutions rests on a fundamental and certain ground, either natural or transcendent, that is not contaminated by the artificial.

Isabel's and Plinlimmon's consolations of a grounding for human life are rejected by Pierre, however, and for him they become other layers of the illusions and artificiality to which man is condemned. On the one hand, Pierre discovers that Isabel's "mystery" lies in "her history itself," not in some essence hidden beneath the surface. In other words, the mystery exists as a particular structure or particular narrative. It does not exist beyond time, but within time; or, more precisely, the mystery exists as human time. On the other hand, once turned to the confusions of human time, Pierre comes to reject Plinlimmon's contradictorily coherent metaphysics by concluding that in time self is "a nothing" compelled to enter wholly groundless and "fictitious alliances" with others. Why this compulsion toward disorder? "It is the law," Pierre says, "That a nothing should torment a nothing." Similar to Plinlimmon's metaphysics, this law is inscribed, as it were, in the very structure of man's temporal existence. But differing from Plinlimmon's, this law does not resolve an order out of the disorder. Moreover, this law is neither transcendent nor natural; it is simply what is repeated in the artificial structures of human existence.

I do not believe that Melville retreats in "Bartleby" from *Pierre's* rejection of the metaphysics of substance and origin. In the story as well as in the novel, such a metaphysical thinking is replaced by examining the structures of history and the law of disorder inscribed in those structures. In *Pierre*, however, those structures are more readily apparent, since Isabel is willing to narrate her personal history, and Pierre himself likens his life to a mythical narrative about patricide and incest—ultimate forms of the disorder that grounds human history. Bartleby, on the other hand, declines to inform the lawyer about anything in his past, particularly about his genealogical ties to the past. Moreover, he eventually severs as well all ties to the present by declining to do anything "ordinarily human," and as a consequence, he seems "absolutely alone in the universe. A bit of wreck in the mid-Atlantic." Yet it is precisely this tatters of personal history, the severed ties to time and humanity, that the lawyer tries to repair throughout his story and especially in the sequel. The rumor of Bartleby's service in the Dead Letter Office suggests to the lawyer that Bartleby's history, far from being isolated, is representative, for it includes all sorts of tales about the cruelties of chance and error that man is subject to. This speculation of the lawyer's certainly challenges any "doctrine of assumption" about the nature of a purposeful history, for it supposes that chance is, paradoxically, the law of man's temporality. And yet such a speculation seems another way to avoid Bartleby's challenge to see the reason for ourselves in what is before our eyes. The law of human history is more determined in the repetition of events than the elements of chance, mutability, or human error can account for. In fact, rather than admitting the freedom for novelty and redemption that the occasions of hazard, chance or free will would provide, Melvillean time tends to be static, like the figure of the maelstrom—a fixity created by the whirling of its elements. Or, in "Bartleby," time is static like a wall or a pyramid, in which we see "the parts of the past as parts of the future reversed."

It is in fact with his eyes fixed on the wall that Bartleby challenges the lawyer to see the reason for himself, and it is because the lawyer fails to see the reason in the wall that he also fails to understand Bartleby. (In the specific occasion, the lawyer thinks that Bartleby is complaining of poor eyesight.) Because of the lawyer's lack of comprehension, however, as well as Bartleby's own silence, the reader too is often at a loss of what the significance of the wall might be. Any critical speculation about it is tentative, and must rely solely on textual connections within the story or within other of Melville's works. Two patterns in these textual connections have been frequently examined, but neither has led to a discussion about the historical significance of the wall. The first begins with the ready-made pun Melville had in writing about Wall Street, the economic/political capital of his society. This interpretation proceeds to show how the trade of stocks and bonds engenders a dehumanizing social structure, the physical emblems for which are the walls that paralyze and imprison Bartleby. A second interpretation bases itself on intertextual connections, and usually refers back to *Moby-Dick*, particularly to the passage in which Ahab compares the whale to a wall pushed up close to him. In this argument, Bartleby's wall becomes an emblem of the brute materiality of existence, behind which there is either a malicious design, an unreasoning power, or simply an emptiness. These two patterns do not exhaust the possibilities, however, and I wish to suggest two others that will lead to an examination of the disorder within human history.

The intra-textual evidence I will propose is certainly less interesting by itself than that which connects the wall to the debilitating economic structures of Wall Street. I wish simply to note, however, that within the story the wall has certain historical and mythical associations. First, the wall Bartleby stares at from the lawyer's office, while "black by age and everlasting shade," is a "subsequent erection," now blocking what at one time afforded "a lateral view of certain grimy backyards and bricks." These details make the wall seem at once ancient and modern, timeless and fashioned, static like a thing of nature and derivative like the things of man. Such a suggestion is reinforced later in the story when the lawyer is impressed by the "Egyptian character" of another wall that Bartleby stares at. The yard in the Tombs where Bartleby dies seems like "the heart of the eternal pyramids" to the narrator, and the character of its masonry weighs upon him with its gloom. This second association is more than an historical allusion, however, since the (empty) pyramid for Melville is the physical emblem of a primal myth. Charles Olson, in one of his many brilliant insights into Melville's fiction [*Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville*, 1947], argues that the pyramid is the archetypal wall, for it embodies both the sense of static time and the myth of man's vain assault on the heavens. Melvillean time, Olson says, "was not a line drawn straight ahead toward future, a logic of good and evil. Time returned on itself. It had density, as space had, and events were objects accumulated within it. [. . .] The acts of men as a group stood, put down in time, as a pyramid was, to be reexamined, reenacted." Moreover, as Olson continues, "whether it is the appropriation of space involved, or the implied defiance of time or the enceladic assault on the heavens, MASONRY is especially associated with MYTH in man."

The myths associated with masonry are all ones of disorder and conflict; they are narratives of the law that is inherent in human temporality. The myth of Enceladus, as it is interpreted and presented in *Pierre*, is certainly Melville's most extended and detailed narrative of the law in his later fiction. In the novel, the stone that occasions Pierre's visionary dream of Enceladus may be either "a demoniac freak of nature or some stern thing of antediluvian art," just as the walls in "Bartleby" seem neither wholly natural nor simply made. The law represented by the stone and the walls is likewise neither the order of nature nor the pattern that man's free and arbitrary will has fashioned. The law is like the pyramid for Melville: "Man seems to have had as little to do with it as Nature." Nonetheless, the law governs the structure of man's temporal existence by condemning him to repeat a beginning disorder, which, in turn, has derived from man's irreparable loss of origin and his demoniac desire to confront the absent origin. The Enceladus myth is perhaps the best account of the law, since in it the beginning disorder is represented by patricide, and man's desire for the lost origin is represented by the "accumulatively incestuous match" of creation itself. Yet for the purposes of analyzing "Bartleby," we can avoid for once the complexities of *Pierre* by turning to Melville's letters for a briefer description of the myth associated with masonry.

In one of his letters to Evert Duyckinck, Melville humorously chides his friend for returning to New York City to live "among the bricks & cobblestone *boulders*." While most of the passage about stones and mortar consists in Melville's hyperbolic joking about the evils of city life, he does at one time turn semi-serious, and, as an indication of the constancy of his thinking about masonry, he says, "There is one thing certain, that, chemically speaking, mortar was the *precipitate* of the Fall; & with a brickbat, or cobblestone *boulder*, Cain killed Abel." Once again, masonry is defined by myth: mortar is what is left after an Edenic origin is forfeited, and bricks are the instrument of a beginning disorder, one that is repeated when Cain goes off to build the first city.

If I have been right to follow these mythical associations with walls in Melville's thinking, the question remains, how does the law of disorder, which establishes and condemns human history, function in "Bartleby"? One answer may be found in the drama of betrayal that gives form to the plot of the story. While Bartleby challenges all the lawyer's accustomed forms and world usages, the latter, with a logic similar to Plinlimmon's, often interprets his scrivener's contradictions as a radical grounding for his faith in those very forms and usages. With his typical mixture of Christian and economic doctrines, for example, the lawyer is able to make use of his contrary employee, concluding that "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."

Later in the story, the lawyer once again finds that his actions toward Bartleby, despite Bartleby's obstinate preference not to abide by accustomed forms, confirm a doctrine that combines Christian charity with worldly prudence. "Aside from higher considerations," the lawyer rationalizes, "charity often operates as a vastly wise and prudent principle—a great safeguard to its possessor." And finally, after consulting Edwards and Priestly, the lawyer concludes that to furnish the indifferent Bartleby with office-room is "the predestinated purpose of [his] life." But if the lawyer decides that Bartleby is the ultimate test of his Christian and economic principles, his beliefs cannot stand the strain of their inherent contradictions, and he ends by betraying and denying what he has argued is the "predestinated purpose" (the origin and end) of his religious and social forms—a betrayal Bartleby acknowledges when in the Tombs he tells the lawyer, "I know you [. . .] and I want nothing to say to you." In short, by acting with Christian self-interest, the lawyer ends by repeating the beginning acts of human disorder, denying, like Cain, that he is his brother's keeper.

The lawyer's literary intention to tell the truth does not absolve his complicity in the drama of betrayal that I have briefly sketched; in fact, his story-telling is a different form of the betrayal or disorder that structures human history. As I have argued earlier, the lawyer's literary situation begins with the biographical form pre-empted for a want of "original sources." To employ Melville's chemical analogy, we might say that the story is the *precipitate* of the double loss of origin and teleological form. Despite these losses, however, the lawyer, prompted by some "evil impulse" or burning temptation, desires to confront the absence of origin and make of it in the story something "ordinarily human." It is indeed a demonic desire to preserve and validate the illusions upon which his religious and social forms rest. Bartleby is like "an intolerable incubus" to the lawyer, for his preference not to abide by accustomed forms challenges the lawyer's most essential notions of self, without which any action or purpose in the world is reduced to an empty masquerade. The lawyer's writing is based on the intention to preserve human subjectivity as an essentialist center, and for this reason he attempts various explanations of Bartleby's strange preference. He tries, for example, to attribute the preference to either an organic or a mental disorder, and when that fails, he would have Bartleby admit that his refusals are acts of a free and arbitrary will, a confession which Bartleby, of course, rejects. Bartleby's preference is neither naturally determined by explicable causes nor willfully imposed upon the world with a calculated design. It is instead a kind of zero degree of intentionality, a blankness to which the lawyer must give a "coloring" in order to protect his own vanity against the suggestion that self is a nothing, a transitory appearance in a repeated disorder.

One way that might shield the lawyer from the emptiness of self is to turn the "colorings" of self into a literal language or a socially useful language, but to be successful that strategy depends on forgetting or denying that the literal or social language of self is in fact a fictive gesture, a way of continually failing to supplement the absence of origin and purpose for human activity. This is the lawyer's narrative strategy with his readers, I believe, that would allow the language of self to become the reconstituted center protecting man's vanity of an essential self. But once tainted with Bartleby's blankness, the language of self is forever suspect or contaminated. The language becomes unhinged from its empirical referents or its social functions. Regarded from this view, the lawyer's fears that Bartleby's "demented mind" is contagious are partially well founded. It is not necessarily true that Bartleby is deranged; however, when the language he has disrupted from its empirical and social designations is once again appropriated for those uses, confusion and disorder result. In that comic scene when the lawyer and other scriveners begin to use the word "prefer," the lawyer becomes very much aware that the word is employed "involuntarily [. . .] upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions." The word no longer designates the choices of a free and essential self, nor does it function appropriately within the social code of human conduct. Inserted as it is in the minds and conversations of the characters, the word disrupts the lawyer's assumed continuities of self and society and points to their fragile instability. What the humorous scene implies is that neither self nor action is the center of language. The word "prefer," like the words "vagrant," "copier," and "forger," is an empty sign by itself, and may be explained only by a play of contradictions that can never be resolved.

The true appeal and significance of "Bartleby":

We can only wonder at the smugness of people who spend their days ironing out every last jot and tittle in Melville's text but to whom his most despairing tales are merely satires directed against someone else. . . . I do not know who Bartleby was. I have always thought he was the stranger in the city, in an extreme condition of loneliness, and the story a fable of how we detach ourselves from others to gain a deeper liberty and then find ourselves so walled up by our own pride that we can no longer accept the love that is offered us. While there is "irony" in the story, it is directed not against Bartleby but against the good-hearted, mediocre, ineffectual narrator, Bartleby's employer, who admits, "I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach." "Bartleby" is a story of the ultimate difficulty human beings have in reaching each other, and I do not think Melville was writing about anyone, except as he drew (How could he help it? Where else would he have learned it?) on his own situation and his bitter understanding of himself. Surely a little less bookish source-hunting, a little more awareness of what attracts us to Melville, would make it impossible for us to be so "scientific" about his intentions, when they can still be found in the life around us.

Alfred Kazin, in The New Yorker, February 12, 1949.

The lawyer's story-telling cannot bring a halt to the disorder Bartleby confronts him with, for his intention to tell the truth depends on forgetting the fictive and artificial nature of the truth to be told. The lawyer's pact with his readers is to confirm the certainties of self and society by declaring that the disorder within human existence is the property of an individual self. This declaration is the reverse of what Bartleby leads to, that self is the property of a repeated disorder. The cure of a "self-interested" literature fails because the language it must employ is already tinged with the emptiness and confusion it desires to deny. "As soon as you say *Me, a God, a Nature*" Melville once wrote to Hawthorne, "so soon you jump off from your stool and hang from the beam. Yes, that word is the hangman." To speak or to write is to be already a part of the empty masquerade of western metaphysics that would assure us of origin, purpose, and end for our history. To prefer not to as Bartleby does, however, is to acknowledge the disorder directly, avoiding all the splendid indirections of the fictions that perpetuate the same disorder. Bartleby's preference not to abide by the fictive forms of human life stems not from an insight into a Truth hidden beneath them, but from a recognition of the "incurable disorder" and vanity that establishes them.

Criticism: Morris Beja (essay date 1978)

SOURCE: "Bartleby & Schizophrenia," in *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol XIX, No. 3, Autumn, 1978, pp. 555-68.

History and Development of Symptoms. The patient, a young apprentice in Chartered Accountancy, was admitted to hospital in January 1958, at the age of 23 years. . . . On leaving school at 17 he embarked on a career of his own choosing, that of chartered accountancy with a City firm. For the first five years his performance was beyond reproach. . . .

. . . The initial change was a general slowing up and impairment in efficiency in carrying out all his usual activities, both at work in the office and at home. . . .

. . . When setting out for work. . . he began to stop and stand still at street corners, aimlessly looking about for 5-10 min. A few weeks later, he stopped going to work altogether, and thereafter, for a period of one year, he remained at home and did not leave the house except on one occasion for a few hours only. . . .

He preferred to stay up very late at nights. . . . In general he preferred to remain upright and would each day stand rigidly in the same spot for periods varying from 1 to 3 hours. . . .

. . . Movement by the patient was associated with visual perceptual distortion of the environment which he described at various times as "a flatness," "a flat streak of colour," "a painting," "a wall". . . .

. . . "I can do something about what I see. For example I could turn round and look at this blank wall. But I can't do anything about sounds. . . ." [James Chapman, et al., "Clinical Research in Schizophrenia—The Psychotherapeutic Approach," *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 32, 1959]

Although we are twice told what the patient described in this case history "preferred" to do, readers familiar with Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" will probably be most struck by all that he would prefer not to. Yet while few readers would deny the similarities—some of them, indeed, almost uncanny—between Bartleby and the schizophrenic described above, many critics nevertheless resist any application of "clinical" terms to Bartleby. Sometimes they do so out of a general distaste for treating imaginative artifacts as "people." But even readers who do not recognize the legitimacy of such an absolute restriction will remember the admonition by the lawyer (who tells us all we know about Bartleby) that "no materials exist, for a full and satisfactory biography of this man." And they will realize, in any case, that too easy an application of clinical terms can be reductive; if Bartlebys are much more common in the world than we usually acknowledge, it is not merely because people with schizophrenic symptoms are so common. Yet if we refrain from the assumption that the victim of schizophrenia is Other, an awareness of psychological contexts should help rather than impair us. The mistake is to take an either/or approach: either "Bartleby" is a psychological study, or it is a socio-economic one, or a metaphysical one, or an existential one, or an autobiographical one, and so on.

A clinical analysis of Bartleby would probably identify him as at least schizoid, probably schizophrenic. "Schizoid" refers to a non-psychotic personality disorder in which key traits are withdrawal, introversion, aloofness, difficulty in recognizing or relating to "reality," and an acute over-sensitivity coupled with an inability to express ordinary hostility or aggressive feelings. But we may feel that even the term schizoid does not do justice to the depths of Bartleby's disturbance. "I think, sir, he's a little *lunny*" says Ginger Nut with the brutality of innocence; his comment comes fairly early in the story; by the end it would probably seem to most people to err on the side of understatement.

We learn little about Bartleby's "case history"—though enough to feel that his parallels with the patient described in the passages quoted at the start of this essay are not gratuitous. If there is any doubt, let me indulge in a citation of another case study, that of "A. J.":

After leaving school . . . the patient obtained many odd jobs. . . . He did not hold any one job longer than several weeks; neither was he regular in performing his duties in the several occupations. He finally became altogether unemployable and stayed home.

His behavior became more seclusive and he gradually withdrew from community life. When people visited the house he would run out of the room and hide under the bed. He would sit with his head bowed most of the time. Sometimes he would refuse to dine with the rest of the family and would wait until they were through. . . . On some occasions he made rather strange remarks to his mother; e. g., "I am automatic". . . .

A visiting social worker finally persuaded the mother to bring A. to the local mental hygiene clinic for an examination. It took some time to get him out of the worker's car and persuade him to enter the clinic building. He seated himself under the stairs near the waiting room, facing the wall. . . . [Albert I. Rabin, "Schizophrenia, Simple Form," in Arthur Burton and Robert E. Harris, eds., *Case Histories in Clinical and Abnormal Psychology*, 1947]

And so I found him there, standing all alone in the quietest of the yards, his face towards a high wall . . . ("Bartleby").

If Bartleby is indeed psychotic, his disorder is probably the most common of all psychoses: schizophrenia. More specifically, I believe, he displays the symptoms and behavior patterns of "schizophrenia, catatonic type, withdrawn." [The critic adds in a footnote: "Although a number of commentators have applied the term 'schizophrenic' to Bartleby, few have been much more specific than that or have pursued the implications of the term in its clinical sense."] He is detached, withdrawn, immobile, excessively silent, yet given to remarks or associations that do not make sense to others, depressed, at least outwardly apathetic and refraining from all display of ordinary emotion, possibly autistic, and compulsively prone to repetitive acts or phrases ("I would prefer not to").

The trait that leads one to specify "catatonic type" is of course one of Bartleby's most notable characteristics: "his great stillness," his "long-continued motionlessness." Of Bartleby's first appearance the lawyer says: "In answer to my advertisement, a motionless young man one morning stood upon my office threshold, the door being open, for it was summer." Melville has carefully arranged this appearance so that we are not told that Bartleby walked into, or even entered, the lawyer's office: he is there, immobile. We see this feature develop, but even our first glimpse of him shows that he has been immobile at the best of times. On the first occasion of Bartleby's use of his enigmatic phrase, "without moving from his privacy, Bartleby, in singularly mild, firm voice, replied, 'I would prefer not to,'" his mildness and immobility conveying the fact that what he is doing is not so much an act as a form of inaction. From that point on "he never went to dinner; indeed. . . he never went anywhere." Eventually the lawyer is forced to move, since Bartleby will not: as the scrivener says in a rare burst of volubility, "I like to be stationary." Finally, told that he must be taken to the Tombs, Bartleby "offered not the slightest obstacle, but, in his pale, unmoving way, silently acquiesced."

Such quotations can perhaps help to recall for the reader the emotional experience of reading "Bartleby"—an experience which reading such case histories as those I have cited (moving as they may be in themselves) cannot begin to match. We are concerned here with truly powerful work of art, and the psychological terms which seem "applicable" to Bartleby *in themselves* clarify very little. Indeed, when their purposes are distorted in order to provide us with handy labels they end by perverting our response to the story—and may even become aids in developing relatively painless ways of dealing with (that is, dismissing) Bartleby's painful case. Clearly, terms like "schizophrenia, catatonic type, withdrawn," however accurate, do little more than identify symptoms. To understand Bartleby in any real way—to "come to terms" with him in any but a superficial sense—we would have to go beyond them and attempt to get at what a therapist, again, would call the *etiology* of Bartleby's . . . "incurable disorder." That is not easy, of course: "it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach."

Recent psychological thought may help; specifically, I would like to explore Bartleby's plight in light of the work of R. D. Laing. Probably the most forceful aspect of Laing's approach has been his refusal to regard schizophrenics, for example, as "them," and the rest of us as "us." In our context, resisting the temptation to distinguish in any facile manner between the normal lawyer and the schizophrenic Bartleby reinforces the critical interpretations which see the two men as "doubles" of one another. But although those interpretations have sometimes been enlightening, they have strongly stressed what the scrivener and his behavior reveal to us about the lawyer, not what we learn about Bartleby. Of course, many critics (nowadays, perhaps most) do in fact claim that the story is the lawyer's more than it is Bartleby's, and many others implicitly assume it. But that does not tie in with my own experience of Melville's story; for me and—as far as I have been able to tell from my conversations with friends, colleagues, and students—for most people, the center of interest remains Bartleby. And if that is so, then we want to know how he may have come to his present pass—and indeed where he is. We want to know what is "wrong" with him, and not just what his being the lawyer's double reveals about the lawyer.

In Laing's terms—indeed his most famous ones—both the lawyer and Bartleby are men with divided selves: cut off from others and from the world, but also self-divided, dissociated. Laing believes (and is of course far from alone in doing so) that "no one can begin to think, feel or act now except from the starting point of his or her own alienation"[*The Politics of Experience*, 1967]. In their different ways both Bartleby and the lawyer try to avoid the necessity to "begin to think, feel or act." Bartleby's mode of avoidance leads the world to call him "lunny"; the lawyer's mode—he is, after all, an "eminently *safe* man"—leads the world to give him the title of Master in Chancery. Clearly, then, there are vast differences in the outward success of their two situations, but it is nevertheless essential to recognize some basic similarities in their modes of being-in-the world. For "what we call 'normal' is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action on experience. . . . It is radically estranged from the structure of being."

Insofar as we may sense a fundamental accuracy in that view, we may come to look upon Bartleby's mode of adaptation as a pathetic attempt to make himself *truly* "sane." As Laing puts it, "the madness that we encounter in 'patients' is a gross travesty, a mockery, a grotesque caricature of what the natural healing of that estranged integration we call sanity might be." These remarks, though general, are surely suggestive in regard to Bartleby; more specific is a passage reminiscent of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Laing is discussing the degree to which we—those of us who are "normal"—are "out of touch" with "the inner space and time of consciousness":

The situation I am suggesting is precisely as though we all had almost total lack of any knowledge whatever of what we call the outer world. What would happen if some of us then started to see, hear, touch, smell, taste things? We would hardly be more confused than the person who first has vague intimations of, and then moves into, inner space and time. This is where the person labeled catatonic has often gone. He is not at all here: he is all there.

The essential point to recognize about Bartleby's behavior is that from his perspective it is not silly, or inappropriate, or "absurd," but relevant, rational, proper, and "preferable"—indeed inevitable. For him, what we call schizophrenia becomes a refuge—the awful result of a desperate attempt to avoid insanity. In other words, it is a *tactic*. According to Laing, "*without exception*" the "behavior that gets labeled schizophrenic is a *special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation*. "Of course, words like "tactic" and "strategy" should not be confused with the pejorative sense in which a cynic might use them to refer to malingering, gold-bricking patients who are seen as simply "trying to get attention": the devices of people like Bartleby are desperate ones, resorted to at great cost.

The fact that such behavior seems the only *rational* choice to people in Bartleby's sort of plight is too often unrecognized, even by professional therapists. Of the patient described at the start of this essay, the writers of the case study remark that "he had no insight," as shown by his persistence "in the view that his behaviour was justifiable and could be logically explained." To a layman, such terminology seems to lend support to Laing's attacks on the myopia of so many psychiatrists in their relationship to their patients. *Of course* this patient views his behavior as justifiable, and to be sure that behavior *could* "be logically explained"; in effect he asks, like Bartleby, "Do you not see the reason for yourself?" —a question we might expect from a therapist as much as from a patient. The patient described as having "no insight" is quoted: "Although you are one integral thing, there are certain things you can do without. For example an amputated leg. You can remove some part of you and you still remain yourself. My body is not quite separate but not quite integral either." Laing, in discussing the anxieties of dissociation from one's own body—the fears of the "unembodied self"—also recognizes that "there is a sense of course, in which such an attitude could be the height of wisdom": "when, for example, Socrates maintains that no harm can possibly be done to a good man. In this case, 'he' and his 'body' were dissociated" [*The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, 1959].

At one point in Melville's story, the lawyer begs Bartleby to "begin to be a little reasonable": " 'At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable,' was his mildly cadaverous reply." Such a remark makes him seem

somehow simultaneously inside himself and outside himself, as if he were both a patient and a therapist calling attention to the patient's behavior. And, as always, Bartleby's words suggest that his behavior is a volitional response to his situation, consciously—even provocatively—made. To Bartleby, moreover, it is the preferable, appropriate response, whether "reasonable" or not. The lawyer of course cannot comprehend "such perverseness—such unreasonableness." When he demands of Bartleby, "What earthly right have you to stay here? Do you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?" the scrivener is silent: "He answered nothing." Inevitably—for the questions are irrelevant. From Bartleby's perspective, his right to remain is not earthly. It lies not in taxes and property, but in something other, or something internal: in mind, or in soul.

I hope my comments do not make it seem as if I am embracing some sort of sentimental or excessively "romantic" view of either Bartleby or schizophrenic patients. I am especially wary of this danger because I am not certain that it is one that Laing himself always avoids, in his desire to convey the ways in which what we call mental disease may be health, and the ways in which "breakdowns" may in fact be or become "breakthroughs." As Robert Coles put it during a panel discussion on Laing, it is misleading to overlook the "terror. . . that some people on this earth feel": "I suspect there is a difference between us and the mad patients and I suspect that we don't know it quite as well as the mad patients do." Or as Bartleby replies to the lawyer's attempts to comfort him in the Tombs, "I know where I am." We may be tempted to romanticize Bartleby as an existential hero (certainly many critics are), a prophet better off in his sane madness than the rest of us in our mad sanity; but Bartleby knows where he is.

Still, if Bartleby's refrain of "I would prefer not to" is a sign of anguished mental illness, it is also his forceful psychic response to existence on this earth. As Laing (like of course other psychologists before him) has been wise enough to perceive, the enigmatic statements of patients "are psychotic, not because they may not be 'true' but because they are cryptic: they are often quite impossible to fathom without the patient decoding them for us." But Bartleby would prefer not to. So when we ask, with the perplexed lawyer, "what is the reason" for Bartleby's behavior, and the scrivener replies, as we have seen, "Do you not see the reason for yourself?" few of us will confidently respond that yes, to be sure we do, certainly.

Nevertheless, out of an urge to dive rather than be eminently safe, I would like to suggest that Bartleby is a victim of what Laing calls [in *Self and Others*, 1969] "ontological insecurity"—which in its "preliminary form" entails "partial loss of the synthetic unity of self, concurrently with partial loss of relatedness with the other," while in its "ultimate form" we have "the hypothetical end-state of *chaotic nonentity*, total loss of relatedness with self and other." We are always "between being and non-being," and faced with the fear of the latter—or, for that matter, of the former—we may resort to whatever measures of security we can find. Laing quotes a patient, not his own: "The only thing I was sure of was being a 'catatonic, paranoid and schizophrenic' I had seen that written on my chart. That at least had substance and gave me an identity and personality"[*Divided Self*.] That remark is reminiscent of Dostoevsky's study in existential paranoia, the underground man: "Question: What is he? Answer: A sluggard; how very pleasant it would have been to hear that of oneself ! It would mean that I was positively defined, it would mean that there was something to say about me." A patient closer to Bartleby, however, is one described in both *The Divided Self* and *Self and Others*—Peter, "a young man who was preoccupied with guilt *because* he occupied a place in the world, even in a physical sense":

A peculiar aspect of his childhood was that his presence in the world was largely ignored. . . . He had been physically cared for in that he had been well fed and kept warm, and underwent no physical separation from his parents during his earlier years. Yet he had been consistently treated as though he did not 'really' exist. . . . He believed that to make his presence felt he would have to go to such extremes that no one would want to have anything to do with him, and thus he came to make the central enterprise of his life to be nobody. (*Self and Others*.)

Such a "solution" is no help at all—though perfectly reasonable from the perspectives of a Peter and a Bartleby, who seem to share an awareness of what is happening to (of what they are doing to) themselves. Laing quotes Tillich: "Neurosis is the way of avoiding non-being by avoiding being." Just as schizophrenia can be the result of a desperate attempt to avoid insanity, so Bartleby's retreat from being may result from an attempt to escape from non-being.

It seems to me that Bartleby is especially relevant to the last of Laing's "three forms of anxiety encountered by the ontologically insecure person: engulfment, implosion, petrification"[*Divided Self*]. *Petrification* entails a retreat into stasis or even catatonia which is one of those modes of self-preservation by which we are accomplices in our self-destruction. One may so dread being "petrified," "turning, or being turned, from a live person into a dead thing, into a stone," that the terror brings about what is feared. Laing tells of a young woman who dreamed that her parents had turned into stone, and who afterward herself fell "into a state which was remarkably similar to the physical petrification of her family that she had dreamt about"; and then he makes an important observation which strikes me as extremely suggestive in regard to Bartleby:

It seems to be a general law that at some point those very dangers most dreaded can themselves be encompassed to forestall their actual occurrence. Thus, to forgo one's autonomy becomes the means of secretly safeguarding it; to play possum, to feign death, becomes a means of preserving one's aliveness. . . . To turn oneself into a stone becomes a way of not being turned into a stone by someone else.

When one is turned into a stone by someone who ignores one's identity or autonomy, or who regards one as a "thing," "an *it*," one is "depersonalized"—and, as Laing observes, "depersonalization is a technique that is universally used as a means of dealing with the other when he becomes too tiresome or disturbing."

Certainly it is easy enough to show that Bartleby is regarded and treated as an inorganic object, a thing, even by the fundamentally kind and impressively patient lawyer:

Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors.

He also compares Bartleby to "a bit of Windsor soap," or "the last column of some ruined temple," and describes him as "a fixture in my chamber." Even at one of his most sympathetic moments, when he recognizes the "predestinated purpose" of his life to be that of providing Bartleby with "office-room," the lawyer expresses himself in similar imagery: "I shall persecute you no more; you are harmless and noiseless as any of these old chairs." Surely at least one of the sources for Bartleby's having become a "thing" is that he has been looked upon and treated as one.

But Laing provides still further hints indicating the sources behind Bartleby's petrification. We have already touched upon the paradoxical possibility that Bartleby has adopted petrification as a form of self-protection. Unfortunately, like so many psychological defenses, petrification is not merely futile but more destructive than what it is supposed to provide a defense against—notably, the world: "If the whole of the individual's being cannot be defended, the individual retracts his lines of defence until he withdraws within a central citadel. He is prepared to write off everything he is, except his 'self.' But the tragic paradox is that the more the self is defended in this way, the more it is destroyed."

Alternatively, the self may be protected or defended by means of its denial: this will be seen, however, as a repudiation of the "false self." The "false self" is the "personality" that one has in the outer world, which relates with that world and is observed by others, but which is divorced from one's "true," "inner,"

"unembodied" self. In Laing's observations on the development of "the false-self system" [in *Divided Self*,] we may trace as well Bartleby's development as Melville's story proceeds: "The observable behaviour that is the expression of the false self is often perfectly normal. We see a model child, an ideal husband, an industrious clerk. This façade, however, usually becomes more and more stereotyped, and in the stereotype bizarre characteristics develop." Finally, "if the individual delegates all transactions between himself and the other to a system within his being which is not 'him,' then the world is experienced as unreal, and all that belongs to this system is felt to be false, futile, and meaningless." While the false-self system becomes more "extensive" and "autonomous," it also "becomes 'harassed' by compulsive behaviour fragments," and "all that belongs to it becomes more and more dead, unreal, false, mechanical." In the meantime, the inner self remains "transcendent, unembodied, and thus never to be grasped, pinpointed, trapped, possessed." Given such distinctions, when the false self is repudiated, there may be nothing left.

Moreover, dividing the self in such a way not only entails dissociation from and within oneself, but inevitably leads as well to dissociation from others. In repudiating the false self—the self after all that relates to others, however "falsely"—one repudiates all contact with other people. Bartleby obviously does that, yet even as he does so his dissociation from others takes a form that surely reveals an appeal to the lawyer for some mode of contact.

But the lawyer, however sincerely he tries, cannot seem sufficiently to help Bartleby, whose increasingly disconcerting behavior seems to be a way of getting back at him in some awful manner. Indeed, this attack apparently takes the form, as it often does in mental patients, of imitation of the person seen as the persecutor or aggressor. At the start of Melville's story we are introduced to the lawyer as "a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best. Hence, though I belong to a profession proverbially energetic and nervous, even to turbulence, at times, yet nothing of that sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace." He tells us that he is "one of those unambitious lawyers who never address a jury," preferring "the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat." In other words, he is a person who would prefer not to do anything very active. Even his later attempts to get rid of Bartleby can hardly be taken seriously, and perhaps they more than anything else display his deep tendency toward inaction and passivity.

There is a tendency for the false self to assume *more and more of the characteristics of the person upon whom its compliance is based*. . . .

The *hatred of the impersonation* becomes evident when the impersonation begins to turn into a *caricature*.

The impersonation of the other by the false self is not entirely the same as its compliance with the will of the other, for it may be directly counter to the other's will. (*Divided Self*)

This "concealed indictment" of the impersonated other "reaches its most extreme form" in such manifestations as the "echolalia [repetition of words or phrases], and *flexibilitas cerea* [inert flexibility] of the catatonic." The indictment is less concealed in Bartleby's case when, in the Tombs near the end of the story, he says to the lawyer, "I know you . . . and I want nothing to say to you."

Although it has become commonplace to be condescending toward or even contemptuous of the lawyer, Bartleby's quiet indictment becomes all the more devastating in its effect upon us when we realize that the lawyer is more patient, more generous, and more self-aware than most of us would be. (Or than we are: if, say, we are teachers—as I am—how many of us have responded so admirably and so personally to the students who appear in our offices and reveal in obscure ways that they are, or potentially are, Bartlebys?) Yet even the lawyer fails.

An indictment of the lawyer is a mode of accusation against the world he represents, just as withdrawing from others entails withdrawing from that world. People trapped in a "double bind" or an otherwise impossible, unlivable situation may—as in the notable instance of prisoners in concentration camps—abandon the world and the aspects of one's supposed self that are most "in" the world. In the brutal parlance of everyday life, Bartleby dissociates himself from the outer world because he can no longer take it.

The ultimate form of withdrawal from the world is death. Bartleby seems all along to desire death—in existential terms, to be choosing nonbeing over being—even as, in a paradoxical but relentlessly logical way, his retreat into a death-like state of immobility may also reflect his *fear* of death: we have seen Laing quote Tillich on neurosis as "the way of avoiding non-being by avoiding being" (*Divided Self*). Of Peter—whom he quotes as having once said, "I've been sort of dead in a way. I cut myself off from other people and became shut up in myself. And I can see that you become dead in a way when you do this"—Laing writes that he had "set about trying to reduce his whole being to non-being; he set about as systematically as he could to become nothing. Under the conviction that he was nobody, that he was nothing, he was driven by a terrible sense of honesty to *be* nothing." If Bartleby shares that terrible honesty, its most pressing manifestation is probably his refrain of "I would prefer not to." At first to be sure it refers merely to proofreading, but as time goes on its reference becomes more and more encompassing until in the end it becomes all-inclusive—until, indeed, it refers to all of life and living. For poor Bartleby would prefer not to.

Discussing the dilemma of the person "in an alienated untenable position," Laing says that as soon as he "realizes that he is in a box, he can try to get out of it. But since to *them* [others] the box is *the whole world*, to get out of the box is tantamount to stepping off the end of the world, a thing that no one who loves him could sit by and let happen" (*Self and Others*.) Good intentions can be murderous, or simply ineffective: when on the second occasion of Bartleby's refusal to read copy and his statement that he "would prefer not to," the lawyer finds himself "not only strangely disarmed" but "in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted," he tells us: "I began to reason with him."

That is all well and good, but not likely to work. Later, the lawyer is wiser, and he recognizes that it is Bartleby's "soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach." Indeed, the first task in helping a person with Bartleby's problems is no doubt to *reach* that person. The "*sense of identity requires the existence of another by whom one is known*" (*Divided Self*). Even that, however, is not enough, as the lawyer realizes still later, "recalling the divine injunction: 'A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.'" Obeying that call involves a complete breakdown in the normal relationship between employer and employee, just as Laing calls for the complete breakdown in the traditional relationship between psychotherapist and patient: "The main agent in uniting the patient, in allowing the pieces to come together and cohere, is the physician's love, a love that recognizes the patient's total being, and accepts it, with no strings attached."

Only an inordinately cynical reading of Melville's story will fail to recognize that the lawyer does come to experience genuine love for the scrivener. "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" ends his narration: this from the man who, as we have seen, has earlier felt the absence of "anything ordinarily human" in his employee. But his love never attains—perhaps it rarely if ever can attain—the absolute totality apparently demanded or needed by Bartleby. As a result, the lawyer does not succeed in thrusting through the wall that Bartleby has set up—the wall that Bartleby has become. As Bartleby lives and ends his life facing walls we may keep in mind Laing's quotation—in the context of a warning in regard to the danger of the "tendency to *become what one perceives*"—of a patient, Julie: "That chair . . . that wall. I could be that wall. It's a terrible thing for a girl to be a wall." Or for a young man, too.

Criticism: Milton R. Stern (essay date 1979)

SOURCE: "Towards 'Bartleby the Scrivener'," in *The Stoic Strain in American Literature*, edited by Duane J. MacMillan, University of Toronto Press, 1979, pp. 19-41.

[*Stern is an American critic. In the following excerpt, he assesses critical perspectives on "Bartleby, the Scrivener."*]

When Ishmael asserted that the changefulness of life 'requires a strong decoction of Seneca and the Stoics to enable you to grin and bear it,' he was offering a jocular way to handle the shock and horror that accompany the discovery of our human oneness in our common, mortal victimization by the conditions of life. 'Bartleby the Scrivener' is a tale of that discovery, not by seafarers in the vastness of natural force and space, but by landlubbers in claustal immurement.

Some critics are tempted to find stoic heroism in the pallid law-office clerk and to dismiss the lawyer-narrator as merely a wicked victimizer. Other critics more wisely sense a more complex connection between the two men. When I follow the lead offered by a view of Bartleby as stoic hero, I find that treating the tale as an example of Bartleby's stoicism results in oversimplifications and dead ends that do not account for tone and imagery. The insistence on stoicism is negatively useful because it leads to the conclusion that Melville was playing with other, deeper aspects of victimization than grinning and bearing it. Attempts to heroize Bartleby with ideological particularity diminish the dimensions of this perennially fascinating tale, so central among Melville's works. All such attempts seem to arise from the readers' desires to identify and secure Melville within their own rather than his contexts. A review of 'Bartleby' criticism is a useful approach to critical caveats which define the directions that future readings might usefully take.

Melville made mirrors. No other writer in English since Shakespeare has assumed so many protean shapes, and so invitingly, for his readers. 'Bartleby' especially is one of the weird pieces in which readers find whatever they came to seek. The ideological possibilities of 'Bartleby' are enormous: the seer of psychiatric, political, literary, metaphysical, or religious positions is sure to find in the tale a paradigm for his own advocacy. So, a critic reading critics becomes like Ishmael contemplating water as the mirror of the self: 'And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.' What image could be more tormenting and mild than that of the tormenting, mild Bartleby? The critical literature concerning 'Bartleby' exposes the process of interpretative criticism as very often a narcissistic operation in which each reader sees the tale as a mirror of the Gestalt within his own mind.

But the story itself is a fixed thing; it undergoes no more revision by Melville. Though each reader shifts it, unlike water it does not shift itself. Gestalts fix more of the story's details than do others. If much criticism is foolish, not all criticism is useless. And each critic knows that although he too will find the key to it all in a version of his own vision, there are priorities of value to be found in a criticism of the criticism; some visions are better than others.

The political Gestalt of Leo Marx's 'Melville's Parable of the Walls' [*Sewanee Review* 61, 1953], for instance, remains a valuable mirroring because it illuminates more details within the story than does a set of literary parallels like Egbert S. Oliver's 'A Second Look at "Bartleby"' [*College English* 6, 1945], which sees the pallid scrivener as a type of Thoreau. When we move beyond the story to the references the criticism furnishes, Marx provides a more useably wide focus: his Gestalt expands rather than contracts the area within which the story exists. For all its gratuitous contumaciousness, an essay like Kingsley Widmer's 'Bartleby and Nihilistic Resistance' [in *The Ways of Nihilism: Herman Melville's Short Novels*, 1970], fixes many more details in a brilliantly suggestive and useful mirror than does the pendentically narrow angle of vision of works like Mario L. D'Avanzo's 'Melville's "Bartleby" and Carlyle' [in *Bartleby the Scrivener, Melville Annual 1965 Symposium*, edited by Howard P. Vincent, 1966], which, in effect, makes Carlyle the ghostwriter

of 'Bartleby.'

When George Bluestone commented on the making of his film out of the tale, he provided pertinent caveats for critics precisely because he had to specify details in order to recreate them in another medium, and therefore had to examine closely the components of his own Gestalt. His activities led him quickly to a concentration on what was usable for translation, and this process led him, in turn, to an important conclusion about the puzzling scrivener: one cannot specify in event, in historical or literary parallel, or in psycho-biography, exactly what made Bartleby the way he was. Bluestone realized that his film would lose power if it attempted to show the cause of Bartleby's depression precisely because in this area Melville provided no usable details. The film would have to centre on what Melville did provide, which was the effect of whatever it was that turned Bartleby into Bartleby: 'To explain the malaise is to explain it away' ['Bartleby: The Tale, the Film' in *Bartleby the Scrivener, Melville Annual 1965 Symposium*]. In accounting for the criticism available to him in 1962, when he made the film, Bluestone summed up his findings as follows: 'Critics have seen . . . ["Bartleby"] as a tale (1) of exorcism, in which Bartleby figures as a surrogate for Melville, the artist protesting the killing demands of hack work; (2) of psychosis, a classic case of depression, or catatonic schizophrenia, with overtones of homosexuality; (3) of the alter ego, Bartleby as a projection of the death-urge in the Lawyer, a kind of early 'Secret Sharer'; (4) of social criticism, a critique of industrial America symbolized by an implacable Wall Street. Certainly there are overtones of all these.' There is, however, another category at least as important as any that Blue-stone has listed, and that is the Gestalt in which the tale is seen as a metaphysical treatise in which man is a homeless wanderer in a universe of indifference, meaninglessness, and absence of moral point or purpose. This last critical vision often merges with Bluestone's first and fourth categories, and provides one of the few general areas of critical agreement.

When we look at the criticism that appeared up to the time of Donald M. Fiene's bibliography [of 'Bartleby the Scrivener' commentary, in *Bartleby the Scrivener, Melville Annual 1965 Symposium*,] which includes work published through 1965, and add to it a few pieces published later, we become aware that the 'Bartleby' mirror attracts and reflects more water-gazers in certain areas than in others. When many disparate individuals begin to fix the tale into one or two dominant shapes, and especially when those shapes encompass and account for the greatest number of details in the tale, the cumulative effect is to make criticism a useful act as it incrementally defines areas of agreement and, more important, the areas that are problematical and require more and new attention. Accumulated criticism spotlights the points at which we must try to shift our own Gestalts and begin anew with a basic experience of the details in question.

Those who see Bartleby as a type of the writer living in but alienated by a heartless bourgeois society join at many points with those who see the tale as a metaphysical and psychological examination of the terrible loneliness that results from a vision of the universe as empty of meaning: Bartleby becomes the typical figure who repudiates established society, its shallow vision of human experience, and its concomitant easy beliefs. For both groups of readers the lawyer and Bartleby represent conflicting opposites: the lawyer represents the establishment, the unexamined life, the surface vision with its facile hopes; and Bartleby is his rebellious, stoic victim. Depending upon the critic's Gestalt, the lawyer represents (1) the selfish capitalist society; (2) the repressive world of law and order; (3) the world of rationality, (3a) the world of self-deceiving rationalization, (3b) the world of genteel consciousness; (4) the world of orthodoxy; (5) the world of surfaces; (6) all of the above. Bartleby represents (1) the man who will no longer conform to the standards of the capitalist world; (2) Christianity, or Christliness, or—sometimes—Christ; (3) the unconscious, (3a) the hidden recognition of the world as meaningless chaos, as the absurd, (3b) the lawyer's conscience, (3c) the world of preferences, will, and revolution; (4) the stoic tragic view; (5) the defeated stoic writer-artist-rebel; (6) the heroic stoic writer-artist-rebel; (7) the defeat of the stoic human will; (8) the stoic triumph of human will; and (9) any of the above that are not too obviously mutually contradictory.

Many of those who see Bartleby as a redemptive challenger of the lawyer see him as a type of Christ, while those who see him as a passive or defeated challenger may make him a type of the absurd itself. The view of

him as Christ is as much a catch-all as any other category, ranging from a rather rigid and silly assertion that the lawyer is Jehovah, Bartleby is Christ, Turkey is Michael, Nippers is Lucifer, and Ginger Nut—the poor little kid—is Raphael, to Bruce Franklin's much more useful and suggestive considerations of the mythic possibilities within the tale[*The Wake of the Gods*, 1963]. It is also possible to see Bartleby as Christ, even though passive and defeated, if one sees him as an 'emasculated' Christ. But whether he is seen as active or passive, almost all critics agree that he typifies the principle of *non serviam* in whatever world he is said to inhabit. The line of logic leads critics from the *non serviam* relationship Bartleby maintains with his employer to a speculation about Bartleby as a kind of *doppelgänger* or, at least, a conscience for the lawyer. Here too there is a range of opinion, from Bartleby as the embodiment of the principle of the English Court of Chancery, 'the Keeper of the King's Conscience,' to Bartleby as the lawyer's hidden death-wish.

Three firm agreements emerge from the welter of hermeneutics, propaedeutics, and ephemera. One is that Bartleby becomes the repudiator of the civilization and vision that the lawyer stands for. The second is that Bartleby cannot be defined except through a definition of the lawyer. The third is that the lawyer, at least at the beginning of the story, is the bad guy. I delay discussion of the first until I look at Bartleby a bit later in this essay. The second should be obvious, by virtue of the narrative method, without any critical aids. The third is fixed through a series of self-revelations that every critic who has examined the lawyer has noted.

The revelations always cited are the lawyer's conviction that 'the easiest way of life is the best'; that he never suffers any real involvement in his law cases to invade his peace; that he loves the 'cool tranquillity' of his 'snug retreat' as he does 'a snug business among rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title-deeds'; that he is considered to be an 'eminently safe man'; that he loves being associated with John Jacob Astor, that he loves Astor's name, which 'hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion'; that he is proud that John Jacob Astor has named the lawyer's two grand points as prudence and method; that he is greedy about the Court of Chancery and is upset only when easy income from the Master's office is denied him through dissolution of the court—that invades his peace if equity and justice do not; that he uses people—his clerks—selfishly, putting up with their vagaries not out of any really compassionate humanity but only out of his sense that they are 'most valuable' to him; that he is concerned only with the appearances of things and desires decorum and seemliness at all human costs; that he tolerates Bartleby at first not out of real compassion or fraternal feeling, but because to humour Bartleby 'in his strange wilfulness, will cost me little or nothing while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience'; that he betrays and abandons Bartleby while mouthing pious and/or legalistic rationalizations for refusing responsibility and running away. In short, the lawyer reveals in every way that he is a smug and heartless man of small vision and hypocritical Christianity, that he is respectable, bourgeois cannibal, a conformist to all the surfaces, gentilities, selfishnesses, and human enormities of established values, law, and order. He is mindless of pain, soulless to real suffering, compassionless to any possible vision that sees the establishment's world as a lie. Whether he discloses his consciousness as a factor of political, economic, social, metaphysical, or psychological reality, he is a shallow and complacent man of easy optimism.

In detailing the lawyer there is critical agreement that the world he rules dooms human activity to a walled-in (almost all critics, especially since Leo Marx, have specified the imagery of the walls: that need not be done again) round of alternating acquiescence and frustration (almost all critics have noted the complementary ante-and post-meridian changes in the behaviour and personalities of Turkey and Nippers: that need not be done again). People struggle between desire and submission in the lawyer's world—if Bartleby's opting-out is characterized by 'I prefer not to,' Turkey's key phrase is 'with submission, sir'—and spend half their lives conforming to their lot and half their lives raging against it. Yet, the established world is inhabited by people whose very vision is walled-in for, despite their longings for freedom from their hated rounds of monotonous sameness in which everything and everyone is a copy and a repetition, they uphold the system: what they aspire to is the lawyer's top-dog position in the walled-in world. The narrator is interested only in containing and repressing the periods of resentment in which people do not engage in profit-making labour for the boss, in which they turn against the symbols of their monotonous lives (Turkey blots his papers in steaming fury,

Nippers grinds his teeth and fights with his hated desk), and in which people have no real individuality—no real names, but only nicknames—but merely alternately duplicate each other with fits that differentiate them only so that they reflect each other. The lawyer wants to see all activity and appearances buttoned up into law, order, decorum, and profitable routine: everyone is to spend his life copying the law indeed. Whenever the lawyer confronts Bartleby in a serious showdown, he buttons things up. 'I buttoned up my coat, balanced myself, advanced slowly towards him. . . .' 'What shall I do? I now said to myself, buttoning up my coat to the last button.' The buttoning is itself an enactment of a contemporary slang phrase, 'button up,' meaning 'shut up,' 'shape up.' The phrase, like the action, is one of repression, suppression, conformity.

If the walled-in workers yearn, like Nippers, 'the truth of the matter was, Nippers knew not what he wanted. Or, if he wanted anything, it was to be rid of his scrivener's table altogether.' However, Nippers thinks that the way to be rid of his table is by taking on even more of the same, by succeeding, like the lawyer, by continuing the system, not by opting-out of or by destroying it. His twin vices of ambition and indigestion (Turkey's twin characteristics are, similarly, submission and insolence), are indicators of his impatience with how far he has come in a system in which he too wants to be a lawyer. His ambition 'was evinced by a certain impatience at the duties of a mere copyist, an unwarrantable usurpation of strictly professional affairs, such as the original drawing up of legal documents.' Thus Turkey, also, when presented with a token of status—fittingly, the lawyer's cast-off coat 'which buttoned straight up from the knee to the neck'—becomes insolently and snobbishly restive not with the world he lives in but merely with his position within it. And Ginger Nut, the little son of a carter, also plays at being a lawyer with his little desk in the corner. In sum, the ordinary population, in its fits and frustrations and frenzies and alternations, acquiesces, with submission, sir, to the values of the world epitomized by the lawyer. Melville's metaphors for the populace, like Shakespeare's, never give us a picture of a revolutionary mass with class consciousness despite several wistful critical attempts to find in Melville a major literary neo-Marxian voice.

Given the nature of the world's common inhabitants, the snug lawyer becomes even more the enemy of human freedom when he blandly and civilly views the inhabitants of his world not as people but in the way he first views Bartleby—as 'a valuable acquisition.' Committing the unforgivable sin of reducing people to things, he thinks that, like any acquisition, people can be bought. Twice, while trying to get Bartleby out of his life, he gives him money. Commercializing all human relations, he is yet smug enough to feel that Bartleby's 'perverseness seemed ungrateful, considering the undeniable good usage and indulgence he had received from me.' He 'trembled to think' of what might happen to his world if the implications of 'prefer' were to become the basis of human conduct—button up, boy. Contemplating Bartleby's incredible and fantastic plight, the lawyer allows 'necessities connected with my business' to 'tyrannize over all other considerations.' He congratulates himself that his assumptions about Bartleby's departure will get rid of Bartleby in a seemly and decorous way: he can do something that nags at his conscience, but is satisfied as long as appearances and the *status quo* remain undisturbed. He indulges in 'sweet charity's sake' only as a guarantee of his own safety—he continues to buy human beings and human actions. He is constantly concerned that Bartleby is 'scandalizing [his] professional reputation,' and even in the Tombs he tries to placate his conscience by attempting to talk Bartleby into enjoying the sky and the grass—in prison. In sum, that is the case against the lawyer-narrator, and up to this point almost all critics agree.

A quantitative overview of the criticism suggests that this, too, is ground that need not be gone over yet once more, and can be taken as a given in the tale. But just beyond this agreement lies one of the rocks upon which criticism splits, and that is the question of whether or not the narrator changes. Some see that modifications must be made in the condemnation of the lawyer. Generally, the arguments favouring the proposition that the lawyer undergoes a change of vision insist (1) that there is no possibility of salvation for Bartleby, no matter how great his lonely integrity may be, and that there is a possibility of salvation for the narrator, whose increasingly pained awareness of what Bartleby might be gives him a new sense of the connectedness of all humanity no matter how smug and shallow he was at the beginning; (2) that when all is said and done, it is a vast act of sentiment to see Bartleby as a rebel-hero only, for he effects no rebellion. All he does is to commit

an ultimate withdrawal. So, too, it is dangerous to see Bartleby as stoic hero for, as we shall see, it is questionable at best that there are positive moral values shoring up Bartleby's bearing of his burden and, in any event, Bartleby does not in any positive way indicate how life may be borne. Just the opposite, in fact. But the narrator comes to feel the agony of the world at last: Melville is as much the lawyer as he is Bartleby, and to divide him into allegiance to only one aspect of himself is to oversimplify Melville's sense of reality by substituting a straw-man for the narrator who actually exists in the story. (3) For all that is wrong with the lawyer, Bartleby, finally, is socially irresponsible: he leads only towards death. All arguments that would modify the agreement about the initial self-presentation of the narrator depend upon the narrator's sympathetic acts and thoughts concerning Bartleby, upon the tone of the narratorial voice when the lawyer describes the Tombs and murmurs, 'with kings and counselors,' upon the section presenting the Dead Letters Office, and upon the tone of the narrator's final cry, 'Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!'

Those who see the narrator as unredeemable and a total villain all denigrate as maudlin the lawyer's feelings when he begins to react deeply to Bartleby; they dismiss the epilogue as the 'thick Victorianism' of an attempt to furnish a liberal 'hard times' explanation for Bartleby, and refuse to see the narrator's last cry as anything but 'a last sentimental gesture' [Kingsley Widmer, *The Ways of Nihilism*,] It is significant, for instance, that the most uncompromising view of the lawyer as villain [William Bysshe Stein, "Bartleby: The Christian Conscience," *Bartleby the Scrivener, Melville Annual 1965 Symposium*] not only sees him as 'incapable of moral regeneration' but fails to deal with or even mention the narrator's final cry. The Dead Letters epilogue is seen suddenly and somehow as 'Melville's' rather than as the narrator's, for to attribute sensitivity and pained compassion to the narrator would ruin the thesis of unmixed villainy. In fact, all views of the narrator as unchanging villain sweep away every instance in which Melville makes the narrator's villainy problematical without ever distinguishing in terms of tone between the narrator's moments of smugness and his moments of pain.

Well, I find that there is no arguing about tone. If there is any one aspect of literary art that is crucial to comprehension it is tone, and of all aspects of art it is the one most encysted by the Gestalt in which the reader sees the parts. As just one more critic I can only assert that a quick juxta-position of parts will establish tone. Read the opening passages through the Turkey and Nippers episodes. Then immediately read the entire Sunday morning sequence detailing the narrator's 'overpowering stinging melancholy' as distinct from the mere sentimentality of 'a not unpleasant sadness' and his consequent Melvillean awareness of human fraternity in mortal woe. Then read the episode in the Tombs. Then read the epilogue. The juxtaposition must—should—create at least a sense of uneasiness in the critics who assert that the narrator never changes. There is, I submit, a palpable shift in Melville's presentation of the narrator, and it is discernible at the crucial episode—almost exactly half way through the story—of the narrator's Sunday morning visit to his office. Up to that moment Melville has the narrator disclose only those self-revelatory ironies and pseudo-sympathies that destroy the lawyer's assumed image. He is indeed the bad guy. But for the remaining half of the story Melville has the narrator vacillate between continued self-exposing hypocrisy and puzzled concern and pain, with the power of the sympathetic passages—the Tombs, the epilogue—gaining ascendance over the others. The nature of the narrator's consciousness begins to change. Does he still worry about being scandalized? Does he still try to explain Bartleby away? Is he still self-seeking and self-protective? Does he still fly into a rage? Does he still try to evade Bartleby? Of course. That is the truth. It is nothing but the truth. But it is not the whole truth. In the first half of the story there are no expressions of pain (astonishment, outrage, anger, and bewilderment, yes, but not the pain of his own deepest self's contact with Bartleby) or of confusion deeper than those of the law office proprieties. The last half of the story is full of them, including among them such awarenesses as the fact that 'I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach.' It is the narrator, after all, who becomes aware of Bartleby as 'alone, absolutely alone in the universe. A bit of wreck in the mid-Atlantic' Continuing to act the hypocritical burgher, nevertheless, the narrator now has his consciousness focused on the knowledge that he has to wrench himself, almost in tears, 'from him whom I had so longed to be rid of.' Nowhere in the first half is there a physico-psychic jolt of current running between the narrator and Bartleby as there is in the death scene in the

Tombs. And in the context of the Tombs the grubman, fittingly named Mr Cutlets in the original *Putnam*'s version, makes even the lawyer's attempt to cheer Bartleby by pointing to grass and sky less a matter of blind smugness than one of pathetic failure. (Food as a pervasive motif in 'Bartleby' should be the subject of a short critical essay, for the story is filled with instances of food and feeding. The negative relationship of oral gratification to total separation is a psychological rendition of the central question of nourishment and sustenance for human hope, for the ability of the human spirit to bear consciousness and pain and still live and remain human.) The narrator's reply to the grub-man, 'with kings and counselors,' draws the clear and distinct distance in insight, sympathy, and pain between the lawyer and the grub-man. At the beginning the lawyer was to Bartleby as the grub-man now is to the lawyer. One can refuse to recognize a meaningful change in the lawyer only by refusing to recognize that the second half of the story does prepare for an undeniable difference between the lawyer and the grub-man. Were there no change there could be no difference between the lawyer and the grub-man, for Mr Cutlets is but a meaty, mindless, and relatively moneyless version of what the lawyer was at the beginning. Mr Cutlets is an official grub inhabiting the same world of grubby morality that the lawyer's walled-in office does, and he can no more supply sustenance for Bartleby than can the lifeless bust of Cicero in the lawyer's office—the Cicero, no doubt, of *De officiis*. Yet, at the end of the story the difference between the grub-man and the narrator is a qualitative difference, not a mere difference in manner and education, but a difference in insight and sympathy, which is exactly what is denied by an unmixed view of the narrator. Even before the midpoint of the tale the narrator is not unmixed in his given qualities. Consider the following passage:

He lives, then, on ginger-nuts, thought I; never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian, then; but no; he never eats even vegetables, he eats nothing but ginger-nuts. My mind then ran on in reveries concerning the probable effects upon the human constitution of living entirely on ginger-nuts. Ginger-nuts are so called, because they contain ginger as one of their peculiar constituents, and the final flavoring one. Now, what was ginger? A hot, spicy thing. Was Bartleby hot and spicy? Not at all. Ginger, then, had no effect upon Bartleby. Probably he preferred it should have none.

This passage can be and has been fitted into ideologies that polemicize against the narrator. Yet all such critical ingenuity always misses one humble, simple, tonal, surface fact: the passage is mildly funny. The narrator has a sense of humour. The presentation of the clerks discloses an observer with a sense of humour that makes his paternalistic relationship to their vagaries not totally and solely a matter of selfish exploitation. Scattered throughout the tale on either side of the midpoint are small instances of humour which create the expectation that this same smug narrator might yet be a man with enough sensibilities to recognize a connection with Bartleby. As that metaphysical wanderer-narrator, Ishmael, from the very beginning is hintingly given qualities which will enable him to see the Ahab he admiringly repudiates as an extended aspect of his own human identity, so too that prudentially selfish lawyernarrator from the very beginning is hintingly given qualities which will enable him to see that the Bartleby he will compassionately leave is inextricably interrelated with his own human identity. Surely there is a tonal difference not only between the narrator and the grub-man but also between the lawyer and all the other inhabitants and landlords and lawyers who do not for a moment see Bartleby as anything but a nuisance to be got rid of. The difference between the lawyer and the successors to his chambers is scanted or ignored by critics who fix the narrator as a single moral quantity, and for the same reasons that make them miss the intermittent humour of the tale.

But, as I say, the tonal aspect of change in the lawyer cannot be argued: either you hear it or you do not. Rather, I would open a question which seems to me quite pertinent. Why has there been so much commentary on 'Bartleby'? Why so much varied and fascinated response beyond the agreement about the preliminary characterization of the lawyer and of Bartleby as his opponent? Clearly one answer must be that there is something about the tale that creates Melvillean nuance; *something* about this story must offer ambiguity and multiplicities of meaning. But what is the effect of a rigid definition of the lawyer as unmixed villain? The effect is to remove ambiguity, multiplicity, and subtlety by reducing the story to a simple tale of good versus

evil (defined by whatever Gestalt). Problems of meaning remain in the superimposition of Gestalts upon the story and in conflicts between Gestalts—lots of room for explicators still—but moral ambiguity, moral evaluation is removed as a problem. And is not that problem precisely the central one that remains to puzzle the reader and itch in his mind? Remove shiftings of moral evaluations, and all that is left is the working out of equivalents to hang around the lawyer and Bartleby—which is what, I think, accounts for so much critical cleverness and narrowness in much of the criticism of 'Bartleby.' To see the lawyer as a fixed value is to remove him as a source of that itch that engages the reader in the first place and that the spate of criticism undeniably announces. And to remove the narrator as a source is to be quite tricky indeed, not only because the narrator is the only source of information we have about Bartleby but also because the narrator is the only continuing source of response to Bartleby. To fix the narrator is to place the burden for *all* the creation of multiple meaning in the story on Bartleby alone. Yet, why do all readers come away from the story with impression that in the narrator they have met a person—whether they scorn him or not—and that in Bartleby they have met—what? —a quality? And embodied in a repetitious cadaver, at that?

There is in this question a serious matter that must be met, but which is all but unmentioned in 'Bartleby' criticism, and that is the matter of types of characterization. It is neither accidental nor insignificant that all critics confront the story by characterizing the narrator in social, political, religious, and economic, as well as moral, terms, and by characterizing Bartleby in typical or mythic terms. Furthermore, all readers come away from the story with the sense that it is weird. The sense of weirdness is a result of the same factor that accounts for the ways in which critics characterize the lawyer and Bartleby. That is, the lawyer and Bartleby are characters from two distinctly different modes of fiction. The narrator comes from a recognizable world and can be measured in terms of that world: he is the kind of character who inhabits the province of realistic fiction. Bartleby, however, in every way inhabits a world other than the narrator's. He comes from the province of allegorical fiction, or romantic fiction, or both. The narrator is a human character; Bartleby is a metaphor. The narrator is sociologically explicable; Bartleby is no more sociologically explicable than is Ahab. The vehicle for the realistic character is verisimilitude; the lawyer, like his clerks, is given human, peculiar characteristics by which he is recognized, and the verisimilitude of characterizing human peculiarities is the vehicle for individuation, regardless of purpose—sentiment, rebellion, reportage—in realistic fiction. The narrator and his clerks come from the fiction of a writer like Dickens. But the vehicle for the allegorical character is typicalism. Bartleby is given metaphoric weightings by which he is recognized, mysterious qualities independent of verisimilitude or realistic statistication. He comes from the fiction of a writer like Bunyan turned into Kafka—the emblematic quality of characterization remains, but all the rubrics have been erased from the labels for which the character is beast of burden. The science-fiction and gothic impingement of alien worlds gives 'Bartleby' its weirdness. One does not expect the preter-natural or the preternaturalistic to be accommodated into simultaneous existence with the realistic or the naturalistic. It is the calm intrusion of one world into another that gives 'Bartleby' its Kafkan tones and makes it seem so very modern in its techniques and surfaces. In terms of action within the recognizable or naturalistic or Dickensian world the realistic character has dynamic dimensions: his fate and his character may both change along with his insights and experiences. But the inhabitant of the typical world is fixed. In speech, action, and possibility Bartleby *as character* is as rigidly fixed as a corpse. In the problem of moral evaluation, when the question is, what should the character do? Bartleby offers the narrator no world in which to do anything. He offers only the possibility of becoming like Bartleby, which is to say the possibility of leaving altogether the world of reality as it is defined for characterization within the demands of realistic fiction. The very nature of the differences in fictive worlds, fictive methods, and fictive characterization suggests that if either of the characters may undergo change, it is the lawyer, not Bartleby. I submit that in relation to Bartleby, it is the narrator who is not the fixed value. Nor, I should add, does this suggestion make a freak of 'Bartleby the Scrivener' within the canon of Melville's works. The mixing of characters from different worlds of fictive mode is a constant Melvillean technique and always accounts for the element of weirdness in his fiction. For instance, is not the magnificently created sense of displacement, discontinuity of worlds, and disproportion in the confrontations between Ahab and Starbuck attributable to the fact that they are confrontations between a ranging myth and a man from Nantucket, Massachusetts? And Melville's typical characters are disconnected from the humanity of

verisimilitude and the world of its realities. What is Ahab's past? A hint from Elijah. And as for Bartleby, there is only an uncertain rumour about the Dead Letters Office. Consistently and pervasively Melville's typical characters are not of woman born, have no dimensions taken from realistic fiction's world of verisimilitude. They are characters without a past and without social measurements.

In fact, what do we know of Bartleby? Only what the lawyer tells us, and he warns us from the very beginning that Bartleby does not inhabit the same dimensions as other scribes, about whom he could write some amusing and sentimental vignettes. 'While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. . . . Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case, those are very small. What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, *that* is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report, which will appear in the sequel.' The appropriate question to ask, since Melville obviously knew he would furnish no sudden world of verisimilitude out of Bartleby's past, is why Melville chose to add the 'sequel' about the Dead Letter Office; and in order to answer that question it becomes necessary to ask what it is we know of Bartleby without the epilogue.

Here again, the body of criticism gives us a solid agreement: Bartleby is the *isolato* who has come to the nadir of pallid despair in which all things are equal ('I am not particular') and all things are pointless ('I prefer not to'). The ordinary world that demands reasonableness is seen by Bartleby to be a dead end of meaninglessness that mocks all attempts to copy a non-existent law and order ('At present I prefer not to be a little reasonable'). There is at least this much preliminary bedrock of agreement. The criticism divides on the identification and evaluation of Bartleby. To some he is entirely heroic; to some he is mixed in his qualities. As is to be expected, those critics who see the lawyer as all villainous tend to see Bartleby as all good; those critics who see the lawyer as a changing quality tend to see unchanging Bartleby as a quality demanding a mixed response. If we are to be thrown on Bartleby as the sole source of ambiguity and multiplicity, we find that the criticism provides ample evidence that we cannot settle on a fixed response to him. Readers who conclude that Bartleby is the type of the hero, the rebel of whatever—art, nihilism, Christian morality, political honesty, metaphysical awareness—never satisfactorily handle those hard stumbling-blocks of facts which are the specifics whereby Bartleby is shown to us.

Would we have him stand as a life-principle, a rebellion against claustrophobic immurement in the dehumanizing world of the respectable lawyer? Would we have him the representative of true Christianity, true art, or the true revolution in his nay-saying to the mechanical world of law-copyists? To do so goes beyond the basic recognition that Bartleby prefers not to participate in any activity whatsoever; to do so assigns meanings to him that are not verifiable in the actual facts of the story. Because Melville is so heavily involved in metaphysical ideas, because Melville makes mirrors, the temptation is great to assign meanings out of the Gestalt of the critic, but to do that is to reduce criticism to a game of filling in the blanks: the lawyer equals—; Bartleby equals—. But when we look at the specific details through which Bartleby is in fact presented, it becomes a bit difficult to turn our impression of a pallid, sick, corpse-like, motionless, silent fixed being into the life-principle or the humanity-principle or the rebel-principle or the reality-principle or an active body of moral principles. What are the specific terms that actually present Bartleby? In this long short story the catalogue surprisingly is not so long that the salient facts cannot be listed conveniently; and when the concrete instances are precisely isolated, they become quite instructive in the revelation of what is repeated.

Bartleby's movements are most often accompanied by the word 'gliding,' and his voice is most often described as 'mild.' He is 'pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn'; 'he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically'; his face is 'leanly composed; his gray eye dimly calm'; he has absolutely no 'agitation, uneasiness, anger, or impertinence,' nor is there 'anything ordinarily human about him'; his corner is called a 'hermitage' (four times); he is 'gentle' or totally silent; he appears 'like a very ghost'; he is 'a pale young scrivener'; he is characterized by 'his steadiness, his freedom from all dissipation, his incessant industry (except when [in a] . . . standing revery . . .). his great stillness, his unalterableness of demeanor'; his is a 'lean

visage'; he is an 'apparition'; he has a 'cadaverously gentlemanly nonchalance'; he is 'eminently decorous'; he will not be seen in dishabille and would not 'by any singular occupation violate the proprieties' of Sunday; although he has very few belongings, he owns a blacking box and brush to keep his shoes shined; although he does not care for money (he does not touch the conscience money twice given him by the narrator), he frugally saves his salary and keeps it knotted in a handkerchief 'bank' hidden in the recesses of his desk; he has no interest in or apparent need for food or drink; he has a 'pale form' that appears as though 'laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding-sheet'; he is 'thin and pale' with an air of 'pallid haughtiness'; his tones are 'mildly cadaverous'; he 'would prefer to be left alone here'; 'he seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe [like]. . . a bit of wreck in the mid-Atlantic'; his triumph over the narrator is a 'cadaverous triumph'; he becomes both totally silent and totally motionless; he 'silently acquiesced' in 'his pale, unmoving way'; and he is 'prone to a pallid hopelessness.'

It will not do to object that these are only the narrator's vision of Bartleby, for everything we know about Bartleby is given through the narrator's vision, regardless of the meanings we would affix to Bartleby. Melville could have chosen to give us, through the narrator, other kinds of details for constant repetition, but he did not. What he did choose to give was a repetition of details that result in two major categories of impression. One is that of a silent, motionless, emaciated, pale, cadaverous negativism and withdrawal, a suggestion of the implacable stubbornness of a corpse, of death itself. The other is that of a mechanically industrious, mild, and seemingly respectability. Just as the details that present the narrator begin to change at that crucial Sunday morning mid-point of the story, so they change for Bartleby, too. On the Tuesday following that Sunday Bartleby announces, 'I have given up copying' and abandons his industry altogether. From that moment the details of presentation begin to emphasize the characteristics of silence, motionlessness, and death much more than those of respectability. In short, just as the narrator's responses begin to be mixed with anguish and sympathy, Bartleby's characteristics begin to be associated with total withdrawal and extinction.

It is also important to note that from the mid-point on, the lawyer's strange sense of private connection with Bartleby also intensifies. 'I never feel so private as when I know you are here,' he says, thinking of Bartleby. The lawyer discovers that it is Bartleby who mysteriously has the unaccounted-for key to his private chambers. The lawyer has to tear himself away from the Bartleby he had longed to be rid of. And, finally, when the lawyer touches the hand of Bartleby's foetally curled corpse, 'a tingling ran up my arm and down my spine to my feet.' Melville has the lawyer supply ample hints that Bartleby has an essential, interior, and intimate connection with him. When one considers that up to the mid-point the lawyer was smugly, snugly, and actively respectable and that Bartleby was pallidly, forlornly, and mechanically respectable, there is an opening for speculation about Bartleby as an inversion, or at least a version, of the narrator. And after the mid-point the more the narrator becomes agonizingly aware of his connection with Bartleby, yet fails to give up his way of life, the more Bartleby repudiates him ('I know you, and I want nothing to say to you'), and retreats into suicide by refusing any of the food of this world. It is as though the lawyer came to learn that in seeing the repressed and negativistic Bartleby he saw himself, the logical, or at least spiritual extension of his very life which offers neither nourishment nor hope for everything within us that is buttoned up beneath the surfaces of conventional acquiescence to forms and values. It is just this possibility that leads some critics to contend that the narrator is changeless, unredeemed, and unredeemable: he does not, after all, give up his life when confronted with the apparition of Bartleby. But when religious or political meanings are affixed to Bartleby, the nagging questions fail to disappear. If Bartleby is the narrator's conscience or the spirit of true Christianity, why should he tend more towards death, isolation, withdrawal, and silence than towards strength, activity, and expression, as the narrator becomes increasingly tortured by the pain of sympathy? If Bartleby is the spirit of rebellion against the culture that is, why should he droop, fail, and withdraw just as the narrator becomes aware in anguish of a strange kind of justice in Bartleby's existence—just as the narrator finds he *cannot* rationalize Bartleby away with charges of vagrancy or any other charges?

I am convinced that the explications that tend towards a one-to-one identification of Bartleby and the critic's political or religious Gestalt fail and will continue to fail to satisfy the logic, the psychological demands, that

the story sets up. On the level of metaphysical points of view, there is, at least, a general basic agreement in the critical canon. As the narrator, at least at first, represents the materialistic world of hypocritical and blind bourgeois selfishness, Bartleby is the woebegone representative of a view of existence that denies all the shallow rationality and expectations of predictability, purpose, law, and meaning that the comfortably mindless and selfish commercial world selfjustifyingly assumes to be the nature of the universe: God's in his heaven and all's right with the world. On this level there is general agreement that the lawyer, at least at the beginning, and Bartleby are the conflicting and obverse sides of human vision and human experience. If one is a vision of orthodox optimism and institutionalized belonging, the other is a vision of existential absurdity, the vision of the outcast stranger. This vision reduces to absurd meaningfulness all the activities of the lawyer's institutionalized world. On the level of metaphysical vision the psychological expectations are satisfied: as there are no alternatives in the institutionalized world for Bartleby's vision and no point in any kind of action on his part, pallid and silent withdrawal follows.

But when we parallel the level of metaphysical vision with the tempting levels of politics, the psychologies are not satisfied. On this level the narrator is the capitalist boss who exploits those who work for him, denying them full human existence and identity; Bartleby is the nay-sayer who refuses to copy the law-and-order of the narrator's world any longer. But on this level the story must remain psychologically frustrating, especially because there is certainly enough material that 'fits.' One might expect the fury of an Ahab or the activity of a Joe Hill or even the unaware, protesting dissoluteness of the *Lumpenproletariat*, but hardly the ghost of a motionless cadaver. The fictive mode from which Bartleby characterologically comes is not that which satisfies in any way the demands of realistic fiction. On this level 'Bartleby' criticism becomes confused about the difference between the victim and the victim-rebel. Even if Bartleby were to be seen as victim only, what the story would then need would be something like a Hurstwood, or a Clyde Griffiths, but what we have is—Bartleby. And, on the political level, the story certainly does not psychologically support the view of Bartleby as rebel-hero if the type of pure victim is to be abandoned.

The same is true of the view of Bartleby as hero-artist. One might think of Joyce's silence, exile, and cunning as fitting Bartleby, but the 'fit' squeezes a bit with the cunning, and it does not take too much thinking before one runs into equally tight fits with the differences between Joyce's—or even Stephen Dedalus's—silence and exile and Bartleby's. Again, if Bartleby is to be 'the artist,' he is victim rather than victim-hero-rebel, closer to Kafka's hunger artist than to Dedalus. And, even at that, unlike the hunger artist Bartleby has no art of his own (he is himself either a mail-clerk or a copyist) that is sacrificed: abstemiousness is certainly not treated in Melville's story as it is in Kafka's. All that one can say is that Bartleby finds no food for his sustenance or values worth copying in the established world—and we are back to the one area of agreement, which is on the level of metaphysical vision, and which cannot really be specified in a one-to-one relationship to 'the artist.'

And if the ideologies of Christianity replace those of politics or artistic identity as the something further that is to parallel the level of metaphysical vision, psychological expectations run into further difficulty in the basic question of why Bartleby should choose suicide just as he has begun to make some meaningful impact upon the lawyer. What the specifics of the story and the inflexibly unrelenting characterology of Bartleby suggest in tandem with the strengths and weaknesses of critical commentary is either that there is no really useful particular level with which to parallel the level of metaphysical vision, or that if there is, the fruitful directions are to be found in the psychologies rather than the political logic or Christian logic of the critic's Gestalt. What remains, I suggest, for 'Bartleby' criticism that will not be merely another repetition of what has already been said too often is not a one-to-one connection between Bartleby and a clinical category of psychopathology, but an exploration of psychological theory concerning various aspects of the self, theory that will provide a parallel to the metaphysical connections between the lawyer and Bartleby as somehow interrelated beings.

The matter of the epilogue bears strongly upon my view of approaches to 'Bartleby.' For those who see no change in the narrator the epilogue is unsatisfactory because it creates too sympathetic a perspective for the narrator to possess; or, alternatively, the epilogue becomes one more irony in which Melville creates a merely

sentimental perspective with which to establish the narrator's shallowness. In fact, the epilogue does sound like any number of sentimental pieces in the gift-book and periodical literature of the nineteenth century. But even if one were to isolate a 'Dead Letters Office' tradition in sentimental literature, the basic question would still remain: how does Melville use it? The fact of the tradition is much less important than its function within this tale, especially when one is cognizant of the fact that in *Pierre*, written only a little more than a year before the writing of 'Bartleby,' Melville had used various elements of the popular sentimental literary tradition for very unpopular and unsentimental reasons. Let us consider the epilogue for a moment from the point of view of the writer rather than from the desire for interpretation.

What were Melville's necessities by the time he came to the epilogue? He had promised the epilogue at the very beginning of the story, when he obviously had the entire tale clearly in mind. One thing is certain: by the end of the tale Melville has not 'explained' Bartleby. He had planned, from the very beginning of the first instalment, not to say what happened to Bartleby to make him that way. But what could he say to answer this question? What events could he invent which would be horrible enough? And suppose he invented something truly hideous enough so that the character of Bartleby himself were not simply maudlin. In that event, the details of the destruction of all hope, all meaning, and all purpose—all life itself—would demand the writing of another story, something like the day-to-day to day-to-day incremental buildup of the horrors of an Auschwitz, or some other hell. But that was not the story Melville had in mind, and the story he told was the story he wanted to tell. All he could do was suggest, and merely suggest at that, a vision of some sort that would hint at universal possibilities of dead hopes, closed lives, pointless endeavours, and missed connections. Moreover, he had to avoid a hint so lurid that it would shift the emotional emphasis, dragging the weight of the story and the reader's attention from all that had preceded the epilogue to the epilogue itself. Consciously or not, Melville was evidently aware that a hint that really tried to account for Bartleby's life would defeat the very purpose it was there for: to prevent a shift of the reader's engagement to a demand for seeing *more*. The mild, brief universal so lightly hinted about the affairs of mortal men, the Dead Letters Office, says, in effect, 'there is no more.' That is, the uncertain rumour about the Dead Letter Office at once universalizes Bartleby and keeps the focus exactly where Melville wants it—on the effect of Bartleby's condition, not on the cause of it.

Bartleby as a victim of the established world also comes to seem a victim of existence itself, and this, I think, is at the centre of what I take to be Melville's purpose—a speculation not about stoicism but about victimization. In much of his fiction he is anguished by victimization, compassionate with it, fascinated by it, and yet he also finds that in inexplicable ways the victim acquiesces in his victimization and intensifies the process. It is to ask the question, 'What else could Bartleby do?' Neither the universe nor the established world of the lawyer allowed him any alternatives. He could only assume his victimization and accept the death that is the consequence of it in his uncompromisingly honest view of a world empty of real alternatives—and thereby expose the nature of the world. But if the lawyer is to be attacked as the dehumanized organization man, is not Bartleby presented as dehumanized both explicitly and implicitly throughout the story, saying to the life around him, 'I prefer not to live it'?

My contention is that if one is willing to accept the facts of the story's characterization rather than attempt to fit those facts into an ideology, one has to conclude that Melville found not only heartbreak and terror in human victimization but also something mysteriously acquiescent and repelling about the dehumanized victim. The human possibilities for inhumanity construct rationalizations for the perverse desire to barbarize the victim precisely because of his passive victimization: the smug narrator burns to be rebelled against in order to justify his own sense of *separation* from the victim: the bastard is getting what he deserves. I suggest that Melville's psychological insights are too keen, when he puts them in the lawyer's mind that crucial Sunday morning, to dismiss them as merely more instances of the lawyer's selfishness—especially since those insights occur, as they do, in the context of the true melancholy that the narrator, deeply shaken for the first time in his life, experiences for the first time in his life. 'My first emotions,' he says, 'had been those of pure melancholy and sincerest pity; but just in proportion as the forlornness of Bartleby grew and grew in my

imagination, did that same melancholy merge into fear, that pity into repulsion. *So true it is, and so terrible, too*, that up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but, in special cases, beyond that point it does not. They err who would assert that invariably this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart. It rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill' [italics added]. The lawyer's naked glimpse of Bartleby is as though one could imagine the anachronistic possibility of the good, Christian, prudent, American businessman doing a thriving, profitable business with the Nazis and suddenly becoming soulshakingly aware of the death-camps at Auschwitz. The lawyer's speech is partly self-defensive. But it also expresses the horror that goes beyond a defence of one's self in shallow selfishness and becomes a fearful revulsion that includes the victim—take it away, make it not be. Yet what could the victim do but be? Either he must *be*, in the face of the observer's desperate desire for him to go away, not to be, or he himself must also prefer not to be. The first choice can only increase the observer's shock and horror; the second can only increase the observer's guilt and remorse because of his own psychological complicity in the victim's death. The more Bartleby preferred not to, the more the lawyer wished him to vacate the premises. The intimate, interior oneness of Bartleby and lawyer must be contemplated in the intricate and complex context of victimization.

But once a consideration is admitted into evidence, it cannot be used by the prosecution only. If we ask the question, but what else could he do? we must be willing to apply it to the lawyer as well. In the longest and most intelligent attack on the narrator and defence of Bartleby as hero, Kingsley Widmer concludes that the 'narrator never. . . changes his view and way of life.' It is a charge that subsumes within it the many narrower, less thoughtful, and less suggestive attacks on the lawyer and defences of Bartleby. But in terms of Bartleby as the only alternative to the lawyer, what, indeed, could the lawyer do? To apply equal sanctions to Bartleby and narrator is to create no contest. As metaphor Bartleby simply is not subject to the kinds of reality that are inevitable for the lawyer, who is derived from realistic characterology. Arguing from his own political and philosophical Gestalt, Widmer asserts that because culture is the product of the inhuman lawyer's world and serves only to civilize that world's enormities, against which Bartleby rebels, it is a sign of the dehumanizing failure of meliorism. As the lawyer's culture is a lie in human terms, culture up to the total revolution of Bartleby is to be repudiated. Bartleby's naysaying unto death is the truly revolutionary response. In sum, not only is the present to be put to death as a sacrifice to a metaphor of the liberated future, but so is the past as well. (Is it not fitting that Bartleby, who is heroic to Widmer, and who has no emulative present, is a man with no past?) But to me there is a familiar Melvillism in the fact that, being totally committed to his vision and thus isolating himself from all connections with the shallow lee-shore present, Bartleby in his monomania leads not to full life in the future but pallidly to death. It is clear to me that if Melville does not condone the culture of *is*, neither does he advocate a destruction of *was*. Not, at least, the multiple Melville, the mirror-maker, that we know in the totality of his works. One cannot make the corpselike Bartleby a sign of life without wrenching that cadaver out of Melville's presentation of him and into the polemics of one's own Gestalt.

Widmer's charge is extra-literary, for, like all strong art, 'Bartleby the Scrivener' leads strong readers beyond the literary fact itself, and Widmer is justified in stepping beyond. In my disagreement with his view I wish simply to meet him on his own grounds. True, within the story itself, one can find instances to rebut the charge against the narrator. One instance that is always either slighted or virtually ignored in attacks on the narrator is the moment in which he does offer to open his life to Bartleby, to support him, to stay with him, and to assume responsibility for him: "Bartleby," said I, in the kindest tone I could assume under such exciting circumstances, "will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my dwelling—and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure? Come, let us start now, right away." ' At this point it is more than clear that were Bartleby to accompany the narrator, he would never leave for 'some convenient arrangement' elsewhere. The narrator offers no less than a lifelong 'arrangement.' And he does not offer gradualism either; the delays, assumptions, and illusions are gone: 'Come, let us start now, right away.' But even with this evidence those who wish to simplify the story into a totalistic choice of Bartleby-hero versus narrator-villain can argue that the lawyer wishes only to get Bartleby out of the public

building and into his private home—as though the connection between public and private, outer and inner, were not the essence of the connection in victimization between the lawyer and Bartleby in the first place.

So we return to the question, what else could the narrator do? What life could the narrator change to, other than Bartleby's? And again Melville gives us no alternatives other than the lawyer and Bartleby. With this inescapable given, then, let us abandon the evidences within the story for a moment and step outside it with Widmer to the arguments beyond. Widmer identifies the true essence of humanity as nihilism, 'that simply recurrent human reality—the vital desire to angrily negate [sic] things as they are.' (Widmer) It is significant that Widmer feels it necessary to intrude that word 'angrily,' for it provides the human and psychologically necessary dimension that the characterologically typical Bartleby most patently lacks. But, given Widmer's premise, the story 'reveals the confession of a decent, prudent, rational "liberal" who finds in his chambers of consciousness the incomprehensible, the perverse, irrational demon of denial, and of his own denied humanity'. (Widmer) 'The attempt to wryly force [sic] benevolent American rationalism to an awareness of our forlorn and walled-in humanity provides the larger purpose of the tale' (Widmer). But if we must assume that the spirit of denial is deeply human, must we assume, then, that it is the only deep or true humanity, much less the total essence of humanity, as Widmer assumes? Is not the need for self-deception as human as the desire for denial? Is not the conscious as *real* as the unconscious? Is not the invention of predictable meaning as human as the nihilistic response to the revelation of cosmic absurdity? By what fiat may critics *assume*, like that man of assumptions, the lawyer, total categories of the really human and the falsely human in human behaviour and in human history and in human perception? What is true is that we wish to identify as human what affirms life rather than what denies it, what enlarges personality rather than what elaustraphobically walls it in. It is also true that as a repressive principle the narrator in the first half of the tale is dehumanizing. But can the denials of Bartleby really be held up as a model of what affirms life and enlarges personality? For Widmer Bartleby becomes 'a small wan Ahab' who 'defiantly butts all. . . blind walls' (Widmer). Thus Bartleby becomes an 'abstract personification of the attorney's own humanity' (Widmer), as though, again, the principle of defiance were the totality subsumed under the category 'human.' Will, preference, in and of itself, and not rationality—certainly not rationality—becomes the true human characteristic. The true morality, therefore, is the demonic, not the common morality. 'The scrivener provides the human completion, the rage [and here again, significantly, is Widmer's response to the demands of psychologic and he invents for Bartleby a characteristic of which Bartleby is, in fact, completely devoid] to the restraint, the covert rebellion to the conviction that "the easiest way of life is the best," the assertion of *human* preferences against depersonalized assumptions, and the melancholy pessimism to balance the bland optimism' (Widmer, italics added). For Widmer anything less than Bartleby's willingness to go to death in his denials of the present points away from the true morality on the other side of the nihilistic revolution and is merely meliorism. Again, there is nothing the narrator can do short of becoming Bartleby. But the good world on the other side of Bartleby's pallid and unvarying negations comes from Widmer's Gestalt, not from Melville's story. For not only is Bartleby no small, wan Ahab, he is the complementary opposite of Ahab, and offers none of the Ahabian rage that Widmer consequently has to supply for him. Moreover, the imputation to Melville of millennial views of history is most strange in the context of invoking Ahab's spirit. For surely if Melville saw anything in that context, it was Ahab's murderous miscalculations about the possibilities of experience. If our context is Melville's rather than Widmer's Gestalt, what we have is not the total rebel ushering in the ultimate revolution, but the endless, indeterminate continuations of history, as repetitive and as illuminating of human limitation as the great shroud of the sea that rolls on as it did five thousand years ago. The totalistic critical view makes demands and meanings that entirely subvert and are deaf to the despairing tone of the tale as well as to its indeterminateness.

It is precisely at the point of turning everyone into Bartleby, which for Widmer would be the salvation of the revolution accomplished, that Melville draws back—the same Melville who looks askance at romantic and nihilistic versions of history and the human essence; the same Melville who says that if oysters and champagne are the foods of the body, get you your oysters and champagne; the same Melville who warmly sees the inescapable necessity of the lee shore for all that is kindly to our mortalities even as he urges

Bulkington to keep the open independence of his soul's sea from the lee shore's lawyer-like slavish and shallow copy-assumptions; the same Melville who would repudiate the mast-head visions in order to ameliorate the ship's course with the first hint of the hitching tiller; the same Melville who has Ishmael learn that man must eventually learn to lower or at least shift his conceit of attainable felicity. He is, to the point, the same Melville who leaves the stage to the lawyer, not to Bartleby. Because he is the Melville who is so gnarledly aware that the only operable human actuality is the despised and limited *now* trapped between absolutes of infinity and eternity, he draws back from the absolutist prescriptions of totalistic literary criticism that would have the world go even unto death for salvation in the future. He will not annihilate the limited human existence within mortal history, the source of realistic fiction, for the triumph of the absolute quality of typalism, even when heroic. Much less does he do so for idea, the bloodless universal, the pallid metaphor. In 'Bartleby' the problems of fictive characterization *are* the problems of metaphysics and psychology. If Edwards on the will and Priestly on necessity, if Locke and Paley are not justifications of necessity that Melville accepts, the deathlessness of the white whale and the deathfulness of Bartleby are. I take it that the real agony of the story comes from Melville's seeing that man must smash the surfaces of respectable and established vision to become fully human, but that if, in doing so, truth turn out to be the frozen absurd or the new vision become the monomania of totalistic defiance, man is plunged into even more deadly and deathly dehumanization. Both Bartleby and the lawyer are victims of human limitation; both suffer dehumanizations, and 'Bartleby' is indeed a speculation about the process of victimization. The cosmic truth kills. The comfortable lies blind us and destroy our hearts that should be enlarged by woe. Both the defiant vision and the lee shore are needed, both are inescapable, and to wake from the world of one into the world of the other is mortal despair, overpowering, stinging melancholy. It is this impingement of worlds that is Melville's constant technique in mingling the characters of different fictive modes to suggest his view of the dilemma of men.

Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!

Perhaps it is a deep knowledge that one possible corollary of the total revolution is generational suicide—*that* as a possibility at least as much as the good world that is supposed to lie beyond the revolution of total negation—that continues to make the masses, who desire nothing so much as a secured present, the despair of the total revolutionaries. I do not mean for a moment that Melville endorses the status quo he presents in the narrator's world. I do mean that through his vision of Bartleby the narrator is awakened to the perception of vulnerable nakedness and woe that makes us all monkey-rope brothers. Paradoxically it is 'revolutionary' Bartleby, not the narrator, who is the one-dimensional man.

When I called 'Bartleby' a speculation, I meant just that. To see it as a polemic rather than as a query is to substitute the Gestalt of the critic for the Gestalt of the story. To reduce the narrator to a fixed moral quantity is to deny the extent to which the story continues to nag and itch after you have read all the criticism that affixes weightings, labels, answers, to what Melville created as lasting question marks. To insist upon ideological equivalents for the details of the story is to lose the suppleness and openness of the story, which is, I think, why critiques of the story always seem to be so much more rigid than the tale itself.

To fix an ideology upon this tale is to substitute a desire for a satisfying *quod erat demonstrandum* in place of the continuing perturbation left by the tale, and which is a mark of its particular art. The substitution of polemical answers for Melville's questions is merely to discover the face in the mirror—it is, finally, to substitute the lesser imagination behind fixed quantities for the greater imagination behind the tale. The paradox, as I see it, is that the critics who dismiss the narrator as merely smug and bad in his narrow solipsism are guilty of exactly the same sin of which they indict him.

I suggest that as a speculation about human victimization 'Bartleby the Scrivener' is a despairing recognition that neither the lee-shore life nor the truth-piercing total vision that repudiates it provides adequate sustenance for our hungry humanity. Yet, a glimpse of the victim's woe can become the woe that is wisdom, and, given that, a man is on his way to becoming human even in his only present world, for that world will never be the

same to him again. Perhaps that is the birth of revolution. (I suspect, in my memory of his works, that Melville would say, 'No, no—that *is* the unending revolution.') When I say, then, that we can declare a blessed moratorium on saying certain kinds of things about Bartleby and the narrator, I do not mean that we can declare a moratorium on speculations that continue to explore the story both within and beyond itself. All readers provide that 'beyond' out of their own times and visions and will continue to know the headache of trying to explore the story in that beyond. On errands of contemplation art speeds to—contemplation, and leaves us—ah, Melville! ah readers! —with our own dead letters offices. And with kings and counsellors.

Criticism: Michael Murphy (essay date 1985)

SOURCE: " 'Bartleby the Scrivener': A Simple Reading," in *Arizona Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 2, Summer, 1985, pp. 143-51.

[*In the following essay, Murphy contends that "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is a metaphorical story about the inner life of one individual, the lawyer.]*

It is a fact not generally acknowledged that "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is a story with only one character—the lawyer who tells it. Bartleby is simply an aspect of The Lawyer's character, long suppressed. Ginger Nut, Nippers, and Turkey are other facets of his personality or stages in his career. Even personages with "walk-on" parts like The Grubman, The Turnkey, and The Landlord are not separate characters, but parts of The Lawyer.

The lawyer is *a* lawyer, of course, but it might be possible to see him as The Writer or The Successful Popular Writer. Certainly some critics have seen him as that, and Bartleby as the serious but less successful writer like Melville himself. No doubt other occupations, though not all, might be read in for The Lawyer. Full Professor, for example, whose bartlepart would prefer not to teach Freshman Composition with its endless checking of copy. But the author *has* chosen a lawyer and has given him a local habitation if not a name.

The namelessness is important; it has been noticed, but its significance has not been much dwelt upon. The lawyer may not be exactly Everyman, but the reader can fill in appropriately the blank left by the author-allegorist. It is not an accident that the lawyer's underlings do not have real names either, just nicknames—of the schoolboy variety at that, indicating a certain affection even for traits of character or habit not always pleasing but always bearable. Even Bartleby does not have a full name. Is "Bartleby" a first name or a surname, anyway? Between them all they do not have a complete name because, not only are they not several people, but together they do not amount to a complete man, not at any rate to the complete Christian man who can, without qualification, be called by both his surname *and* his Christian name (which we now generally call "first name").

They do amount to a rather pleasant, competent, aging lawyer, attached to his comfortable and remunerative routine, but without any great vices or any great ambition of either the material or spiritual kind; he does not have the kind of excess that makes saint or sinner. No Wall Street Faust, he is the kind of unimaginative man who likes to look upon the face of John Jacob Astor, the man who launched a thousand ships or built a thousand miles of railroad or something splendidly useful like that. From such a man it is a compliment to be assured that one is a useful drudge who does not even have the capacity to sin big like one's employer. This diploma from J. J. Astor, capitalizing the words SAFE, PRUDENCE, METHOD, is his only trophy. The only other thing that decorates his life or his office is the bust of Cicero. The diploma belongs; the bust is comically out of place, for it is the image of a great lawyer who wrote a book about friendship that is still read, and who spoke out with immortal eloquence in great and important causes. It does not fit well in the pokey office of a man who is, by his own admission, a bit of a turkey. One might consider it the remnant of a youthful ideal to serve *pro patria et justitia* were it not that he tells us that he had never really had such an ideal. Perhaps it is

his way of acknowledging an ideal he never had the courage to adopt fully but always vaguely admired. It is the image of a secular saint safe on his pedestal and in his grave. Somewhere around but out of sight he has the somewhat faded picture of an even more famous Man who is rumored to be alive if not too well in the neighborhood of Wall Street.

The lawyer *is* alive and well and sixtyish when he encounters Bartleby, the last, not-too-robust incarnation of something (unspecified) other than what he has taken as his ideal—the easiest way of life. One reason that may account for the lawyer's almost comic attachment to this ideal, and hence for his extreme reluctance to give it up, is the possibility that his current ease has been attained with some difficulty. We *know* nothing of his history, for he never wittingly tells us anything of it. But in such "I" narratives we are often expected to surmise some things that we are not explicitly told, as in the stories told by the young captain in Conrad's "Secret Sharer" or James's "Turn of the Screw," for example. Here the trinity of Ginger Nut, Nippers, and Turkey can be seen as stages of the lawyer's career, ghosts of his past who, like the poor, are always with him, unforgettable, unforgotten, as the death notices say. Turkey may also represent the ghost of a possible and feared future (he is the same age as his master). The lawyer, a benevolent Scrooge, has climbed from gingeriness, through nipperdom, to turkitude and ease. Hence suggestions that the much-desired goal is something of a dead end are not easy to entertain at the age of sixty. Those who have climbed from teaching assistant to instructor and over the ragged strata of professor may have some sympathy with the feeling.

Why don't I say No to Safe; go out and get drunk once in a while? Why don't I go home and do something else with my declining years besides flunkying for rich men?

With submission, sir. I cannot do that, sir.

Why not?

Well, for one thing, I have no home to go to: no wife, no children. Never had the time. Or maybe it was because I preferred not to be burdened in that way. In any case, I have only my work and the office. Besides, a man who has a good overcoat, but who remembers the time when he did not, is eternally afraid that the time will come again when he will not. He can never really relax in that overcoat, because he knows as well as any Russian that if he does, someone is going to take it away from him.

So I come to work, even in the afternoons which I could probably take off now. I am not J. J. Astor nor was meant to be. Not Jesus Christ either, though I admire both in their degree.

The trinity, always with him because part of his past and present and possible future, are not and never have been quite content with the lot he has chosen. But theirs is and always has been a manageable dissatisfaction, the kind that most people have to deal with. It is when the lawyer takes on the job of Master in Chancery, a not very onerous but quite remunerative position, that the protest within him takes on a new form. Quiet and almost unnoticed at first because of its difference from the noisy but harmless cantankerousness of the trinity, it becomes quietly more insistent and more unmanageable. At first the lawyer pretends that this master's job, so dubious apparently that even nineteenth-century politicians later reform it out of existence, deserves all his attention, and he buries his new misgivings (Bartleby) under a pile of work which blots out unease with industry. But the uneasiness is now in the same room with him, blocked off only by a screen and not by doors which can be shut to keep out the noisy but tolerable objections of Turkey and the others. Bartleby is merely a whisper away, and when the workaholic routine begins to fail, the objection comes through loudly enough to be heard.

This rebellion is of an altogether less manageable kind than the semi-comic antics of his other goblins. This is not comic at all; it is becoming serious now, for he cannot easily shut out the persistent, nagging thought that he would prefer not to do a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title deeds.

But I can do nothing else. I have no home life, only an office life. I have begotten and bred nothing, and certainly cannot start now, can I? Nippers and the others are not my recalcitrant but eventually obedient children. They are just parts of me that will die with me. And that may very well occur soon if I give up this work, which is the only life I know. Even if I did not die of that, I should certainly not be at ease. The trinity will not go away; their antics may be different, but they will haunt me with the fear of coatlessness, a fear not to be scoffed at. Prudence and Method may not be theological virtues up there with Faith, Hope, and Charity; but they are the hinge that has enabled me to swing not only a good overcoat, but the regard of a man like John Jacob Astor, a feat to be sneered at only by those who have never had even a back-handed compliment from a robber baron, or those too well-heeled to need him or too unworldly to care. And, sirs, with submission, that am not I.

I work six days a week and, as society prescribes, I rest on the Sabbath—more or less. One Sunday recently, though, when I came downtown to worship at Holy Trinity, I was seduced into paying a visit to my nearby place of work on this holiday—sorry, holy day. There I found my new employee Bartleby in possession, urging me not to come into my own office, if you don't mind; asking me not to violate by such secular occupation the proprieties of the day, as I think he put it. An insubordinate suggestion from one of my own underlings, certainly. Rather insolent, too, the way he picked up on my own turn of phrase. That could become infectious, and bad for discipline in the office.

I'm afraid I listened to him at first, but finally the lawyer in me asserted himself, and I entered. What I found was not very spectacular, really the same office that I occupy the other six days of the week, but I did see it with slightly different eyes—Sabbath eyes, I suppose. At any rate there was the naked evidence of an arid existence, including the pathetic savings in my desk. My savings?

Bartleby has no mirror, but the narrator gets a glimpse of himself, and unwittingly paints a self-portrait into his picture of that barren bachelor existence along with his first intimation of its relevance to himself: "For both Bartleby and I were sons of Adam"—a characteristically sentimental touch. But the vision of their "fraternal" relationship is momentary, and clouded by the usual office gloom. It might have been the lawyer's incident on the road to Damascus, but the walls do their work. The lawyer has not kept these chambers for nothing. There can be no dazzling light in there, and the dimness allows him to perceive things more or less as he wills. Splendid visions that knock you off your office chair are reduced to shadowy specters seen as in a glass darkly. You can even turn the glass to the wall if you find what you see disturbing. Our narrator *does*. He attributes to "Bartleby" what the reader sees to be true of the narrator himself:

What miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed. Of a Sunday, Wall Street is as deserted as Petra.

And yet you cannot stay away from it.

But (if you'll allow me a little witticism) super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam. It is upon this rock that I shall build, indeed have built, my church. Or, to be more modest, but equally metaphorical, it is there that I occupy a small, unpretentious chapel in the temple built by men like J. J. Astor. It is as dim as an orthodox church like Holy Trinity, only there is no stained glass, just grimy windows and walls that obstruct the light

If the likes of Bartleby prevail against us, what will happen? We conduct a useful service to man on six of seven days a week. Some of you may misconstrue that into "a useful service to Mammon six days a week." But laborare est orare, to work is to pray. That is our antiphon, and it has a long and respectable history, if I mistake not. Even with only half the mind on the job on any given morning or afternoon, we still offer a service acceptable to the law, and always in the past, I thought, not unacceptable unto the Lord.

Then came this strange acolyte who was an angel of work at first, but now answers our antiphon with the unorthodox response "I would prefer not to. " I could understand it a little better if he were less subjunctive about it, if he said plainly "non serviam. "Then I should know for certain (I think) where he came from and why.

Reason and bribery, as he frankly calls them, or prayer and sacrifice, as he might have called them, do not work. Something more is being asked for, he knows. So he flees with the desperation of a good man determined to avoid the occasions of sin. For do we not pray "Lead us not into temptation." And is it not often up to us to deliver ourselves from evil, real or apparent? But Bartleby continues to trespass against him even at a distance. The lawyer makes one more effort to exorcise this now-weakened spirit in the only fashion he knows how: there in the desert of Wall Street he makes Bartleby several offers—of work. Do they reveal the lawyer's failure or his refusal to comprehend what is being asked, or do they show a last attempt to compromise about a demand that he understands reasonably well—well enough, at any rate, to feel that he is being asked for too much? Does he know that his final offer, to take Bartleby home, is in fact empty? Bartleby has been there already and has been asked to leave. For the lawyer's home is his office, and as the story shows, he cannot be reached there. To reverse once more the application of his comments about Bartleby: "his soul I could not reach." Earlier communications have remained unanswered, or have been returned unopened to end up in the Dead Letter Office. Now even a personal messenger, a sort of Wall Street runner (in place), has been clumsily but effectively sidestepped, and his message evaded. Mr. Worldy Wiseman is successful and sixty, and will stay comfortably in Vanity Fair, thank you.

Bartleby, a clerk whose speech is short and quick and full of high sentence, a gaunt, sober, threadbare man, does not relate the old story of patient Griselda, but enacts the story of a new Griselda. Unlike the old one, he does not win out in the end, for this is a tale of modern Wall Street or Lombard Street, not a romance of old York or old Lombardy. This Griselda is dead and buried in *New York*. The mettlesome romantic poet Byron is also dead and buried somewhere far away; and romantic Ireland's dead and gone and with O'Leary in the grave. The unblinking eye of common or gorgon sense continues to turn them all stone cold, fit only for monuments to be erected by those who live happily ever after, like the lawyer; to be carved or scrawled upon by those, like us, who criticize ever after both monument and builder.

I did my best. I really did. How many of my detractors could have done better? I think I know St. Matthew's Gospel and the Sermon on the Mount and the Corporal Works of Mercy as well as the next man. I certainly visited Bartleby in prison. At the Tombs I urged Turkey—I mean The Turnkey—to let him remain in as indulgent confinement as possible. I have forgotten the name of The Grubman, which I did ask for. Something resembling Ginger Nut, I think. At any rate he shared that perceptive young fellow's view of Bartleby's sanity. He also performed a function rather like his, so I paid him to see that Bartleby was offered good food. The prison itself was not so bad, I remember. There was grass under foot and sky overhead, though Bartleby did not seem to notice. Difference of mood, I imagine. He was marooned on this not unpleasant island, you might say, with a plentiful supply of food and water, which I had provided. But he spoke and acted almost as if I had made him walk the plank. As you very well know, I had been at pains to avoid that kind of—premature act.

So I turned away, sadly. He wanted too much. He really did. He preferred not to eat our food, which was too coarse for him, as he had preferred not to share our work, which was too crass for him. He was not really of this world. We, fortunately or unfortunately, are.

So he sleeps with Kings and counsellors. Now there is a phrase I have always liked. It hath a round and orbicular sound to it, though it comes from a strange chapter of a strange book about a man who was expected to give up all his possessions with equanimity. It all turned out well in the end, however. They read a good deal of that sort of thing over at Holy Trinity, and it goes well enough with the stained glass. Besides, they are really a rather wellbred lot, who do not like extremes, although I think I can say that we have not reduced it all to mere literature, like some college professors I have heard about.

Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity! Ah, well.

Criticism: Graham Nicol Forst (essay date 1987)

SOURCE: "Up Wall Street towards Broadway: The Narrator's Pilgrimage in Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 24, No. 3, Summer, 1987, pp. 263-70.

[In the following essay, Forst contends that "Bartleby, the Scrivener" records a spiritual awakening undergone by the narrator.]

"No materials exist," says Bartleby's worldly employer, for "a full and satisfactory biography of this man."

For nothing is ever "ascertainable" about such men, except what our own "astonished eyes" tell us. Perhaps such men hardly "exist" except deep in our mythic imaginations where, as archetypes, they rest, until their presence is urged forth by the call of touching, sympathetic imaginations, Coleridge's, Melville's, Conrad's. Or the writers of Isaiah, or the Gospels.

But the surprising thing is not that *we* should discover such a mythic presence in this character—after all, we've met Ahab and Billy Budd. The surprising thing is that it should be recognized by an elderly, conservative, "eminently *safe*" prudent, methodical attorney-at-law, whose vision has been long dimmed by unambition and the dolor of pencils and dust in his walled-in quarters in New York's financial district. Exactly what "materials" are missing? Do not the parts make up the whole? Has not everyone by the mid-nineteenth century caught the spirit of Positivism and Scientism?

Apparently not. And yet critics differ quite widely on this question of whether there is any development, or "growth" in the narrator of Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," and if there is, of what *kind* of change he undergoes. Most critics are willing to grant that he has at least been "vaguely perturbed" or "temporarily shaken" [Maurice Friedman, "Bartleby and the Modern Exile," in *Melville Annual 1965*, edited by Howard P. Vincent, 1966], but no more, perhaps because, as William Bysshe Stein puts it, he is "incapable of moral regeneration," and therefore unable to exhibit "[any] evidence of contrition" ["Bartleby: The Christian Conscience," in *Melville Annual 1965*]. In fact, Stein actually finds Melville inviting "an association with Judas" in the figure of the lawyer, suggesting perhaps that the lawyer's "change" was not exactly for the best.

At the other extreme, there are those who see the lawyer as almost beatified through his association with Bartleby. Leo Marx, for example, in his well-known and influential article "Melville's Parable of the Walls" [*Melville Annual 1965*,] sees in the lawyer's famous peroration ("Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!") neither rhetoric nor self-pity, but rather a "deeply felt and spontaneous . . . expression of human brotherhood as persistent, as magical as the leaves of grass"; and more recently, Donald H. Craver and Patricia R. Plante have described the pusillanimous attorney as "[rising] to heights of nobility every bit as ethereal as those reached by [Bartleby]" ["Bartleby, or the Ambiguities," in *Studies in Short Fiction* 20, Spring-Summer, 1983].

Part of the difficulty in understanding the kind of change, if any, the lawyer experiences lies in the fact that, although he is quite frank about his "snug" life *before* Bartleby arrived, he reveals little about his existence after Bartleby's death: does he return to his new chambers? if so, what is his attitude towards his work, his employees? and if not, what *does* he do now?

Such speculations are not tantamount to asking what becomes, say, of Coleridge's sadder but wiser wedding guest when he arises the morrow morn: after all, we never hear from him again. Melville's narrator, on the other hand, has presented us with a twenty-thousand word "biography" (confession?) he expects us to read, and that in itself should tell us *something* about how he has been affected by his relationship with Bartleby.

To some extent, our understanding of Melville's intentions with regard to the lawyer is aided by the recent turn in "Bartleby" criticism which identifies the scrivener as a Christ-figure. For once this connection is made, the role of the timid attorney can be seen as similar to that of the shady night disciple of the Gospel of John: Nicodemus, the wealthy Pharisee who comes to Christ at dusk, and receives the devastating knowledge that he must be "born again." A literalist, he of course misses the metaphor: can one "enter the second time into his mother's womb?" he asks, densely (John 3:4).

Nicodemus leaves, apparently puzzled; and we almost totally lose sight of him, until John 19, where he reappears silently to enact, along with Joseph of Arimathea, the great redeeming love-labour of the embalming and entombment of the Christ (39-42). Apparently, *something* had entered the good man's soul, and whatever else John wanted us to see in the myth of Nicodemus, we certainly learn from it the transforming (or biblically, cleansing or healing) power of faith brought by the recognition of God's presence.

Something similar, I think, is Melville's intention with the narrator of "Bartleby," that is, to depict an instance of what Joseph Campbell has identified [in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*] as the hero-archetype who "refuses the call," because he is "walled in by boredom" or (in Freudian terms) "bound in by the walls of childhood" (i. e., unable to shed the "infantile ego"). Such characters are sometimes unable (Minos, Daphne, Lot's wife) to confront the possibility of their salvation, but there are many examples of characters (Brynhild, Sleeping Beauty) whose "obstinate refusal of the call proves to be the occasion of a providential revelation of some unsuspected principle of release"[*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.]

Such is the case with Nicodemus, and such is the case with Bartleby's hesitant biographer who, like his fellow biblical lawyer, is first presented to us as a literalist, bent on drawing a picture of himself as the epitome of cool dispassion and Latinate formality, determined to avoid the trivial or sentimental yet (now, in any case, if not before his experience with Bartleby) sensitive and literate enough, and apparently at great enough leisure, to consider writing biographies of scriveners he's known. In those pre-Bartleby days, he was an *homme moyen*, a peace-loving, "snug" man who has been deeply shaken by his meeting with this mythical presence for whom no biography can be written—this Cain, this Wandering Jew, this Ancient Mariner, this Christ. His life was gray: like the angel of the church of the Laodiceans in Revelation, he was "neither hot nor cold"; he was a man whom we, like the angel of the Lord, would "spue out of our mouths" (3:16). He has been strictly a man of this world, never thinking beyond the realms of animal, mineral, vegetable, terms reflected by the names of his employees—"Turkey," "Nippers," (which Melville's Webster would have defined as "pliers") and "Ginger Nut" respectively. The four lived perfectly harmoniously in the confines of their office-cum-cell on Wall Street.

Until *He* appeared, in answer to a Help Wanted advertisement. And while the lawyer, like the biblical Nicodemus, has shown a preference for darkness, Bartleby by contrast is immediately associated with light: upon his "advent," he is framed by the light of the open door; and he is soon placed in a corner of the office where "the light came down from far above . . . as from a very small opening in a dome."

The story of the hermit's "ascendance" from the life of copy-clerk, and the narrator's rather hesitant epiphany, begins *tenia die*, "on the third day" of his employment. It begins, of course, with one of literature's most famous refusals to comply, a rebellion which cannot, in terms of this type of myth, end, until the attorney has been shown the way to "come to the light," to quote Christ's challenge to Nicodemus (John 3:20).

Melville presents the stages of the lawyer's growth with care, building gradually towards the story's climax, which occurs on that fateful Sunday morning, when the narrator decides to go to church to hear "a celebrated preacher." Halfway there, he is drawn to his chambers, where he finds "the apparition of Bartleby," who refuses the lawyer entrance. Bartleby says he is "deeply engaged."

Bartleby's presence in the office of a Sunday has "a strange effect" on the lawyer. He finally begins to perceive a certain aura of holiness about his erstwhile tenant: could Bartleby be desecrating God's law by *copying* on a *Sunday*? No: "there was something about Bartleby that forbade the supposition that he would by any secular occupation violate the proprieties of the day." Bit by bit, the lawyer begins to die, painfully, to the world. For "the first time" in his life, as he admits in this his most passionate confession yet, he finds himself in the grip of an "overpowering stinging melancholy." He suddenly feels drawn "irresistably to gloom," and, more important, begins to realize a new, "fraternal" relation to Bartleby: "For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam."

Now we are at the dead centre of the story: this experience has obviously been a deeply searching one for the lawyer, so much so that he now sees his past religious life as gesture and empty ritual. As he puts it, he "did not accomplish the purpose of going to Trinity Church that morning," realizing that "the things [he] had seen disqualified [him] for the time from church-going"—a surprising description of the dark he walks in from this benighted somnambulist!

As a further sign of his "enlightening" attitude, the lawyer begins to be genuinely solicitous towards Bartleby. He tries to find out about Bartleby's past, his needs; he even begins to defend him against the tormenting Nippers, just as the gradually awakening Nicodemus finally began to defend Jesus against his detractors (see John, 7:50-52).

Nevertheless the narrator, unable to find in his heart the necessary compassion to reach out to Bartleby, tries to fire him, and then to buy him off. "What earthly right have you to stay here?" demands the lawyer in frustration.

It's a rhetorical question: his being there has nothing, of course, to do with "earthly" rights. Bartleby's mission is divine: to awaken the narrator to his responsibility with regards to the keeping of his brother.

At this point in the story, the narrator drifts into a contemplation of a bloody 1841 Wall Street murder of "the unfortunate Adams" by the "still more unfortunate Colt." At first glance, this allusion hardly seems appropriate for a person who has begun to awaken to his fraternal responsibilities, and who has just admitted to Bartleby's "wondrous ascendancy" over him. And in fact many critics, including the most recent and thorough chronicler of the Colt-Adams murder, T. H. Giddings, find in the allusion an incongruous associative leap, i. e. from the mere "nervous resentment" the lawyer felt over Bartleby's recalcitrance, to thoughts of mayhem.

In fact Giddings thinks the association so inapt that he judges it an artistic blemish; he goes so far as to accuse Melville here of "carelessness" in plotting, of poorly "imagining the scene"; and to imply that in any case the allusion was and is too topical to serve the needs of fiction ["Melville, the Colt-Adams Murder, and 'Bartleby,'" in *Studies in American Fiction 2*, Autumn, 1974].

If we regard the event as just another New York homicide, it's hard to disagree with Giddings; it happened eleven years before the appearance in print of "Bartleby," and, obviously, has faded farther and farther into obscurity with each successive generation of readers. And even if, for whatever narrative reason, Melville *did* wish the allusion to the historical case to register at least with his contemporary readers, he gives precious few details of the case to trigger their recollections.

But what if the murder be seen not as just another down-town homicide but as the *archetypal* homicide: the murder of Cain by Abel, an event which figures again and again in Melville's works. Not only do the initials (C, A) fit but we also have the specific allusion to Cain's father in the name "Adams," which is emphasized in the line following this paragraph when the lawyer talks of "the old Adam of resentment" rising in him. Also, this interpretation accounts for the lack of specific details of the New York murder in the allusion, and for the

reference to the murderer as being (i. e. like Cain) "more unfortunate" than his victim. As well, it emphatically saves Melville from the charge of poor plotting and imagining.

Indeed, the opposite becomes true; seen in this way, the allusion becomes a master-stroke of plotting, as perfectly placed to develop the theme of the lawyer's moral awakening: for it is immediately after this allusion, with its attendant question of fraternal responsibility, that the narrator suddenly finds himself able to "grapple" and "throw" his old streak of meanness, simply by recalling the redeeming injunction:

" 'A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.' " "Yes," muses the lawyer, as if to underline this moment of redemptive release, "this it was that saved me."

Gradually, the lawyer begins darkly to perceive that Bartleby was "billeted upon [him] for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence," recalling the verse from John 3 where Nicodemus tells Christ, "we know that thou art a teacher come from God" (2). The lawyer now sees comforting Bartleby as his "mission in this world" and his new frame of mind as "blessed."

Tragically, however, he cannot live up to the demands made on him, and Bartleby ends up being led to prison in a scene "contrived," as Stein says, "to parallel the scenario of the crucifixion." And since the story is set in downtown Manhattan, Melville can build on this line of Christian (Easter) imagery by referring to the name of the prison to which Bartleby has been led, "The Tombs," as it was and still is (appropriately) called. And when the guilt-stricken narrator finally goes to visit Bartleby there, he is greeted with Christ's admonition to the unbelievers in John 5: " 'I know you.' "

This line of imagery comes to a point when, the last time the narrator goes to the Tombs, he is unable to find Bartleby. And although (again like Nicodemus) he does find the martyr's pitiable physical remains (in a position, says [Ray B. Browne in his *Melville's Drive to Humanism*, 1971], "suggestive of the picture of the crucified Christ taken down from the cross"), Bartleby's self, according to the narrator, *has* arisen from the Tombs, to live—and here he quotes from Job, "with kings and counselors."

With this poignant reference to the life-curse of the Old Testament's most exquisite sufferer, we see how much the narrator has grown in his thought and feelings. No longer the *homme moyen* of pre-Bartleby days, the "unambitious," "snug," "cool," and "eminently *safe*" attorney, who breathed, perhaps, but was nonetheless "deficient in life," he now clearly brims with it, having learned about suffering and despair, about human hope and hunger; having clearly heard the cries for compassion and brother-hood. In Melville's clever play on Manhattan street names, he has passed "up Wall Street towards Broadway."

But perhaps the best evidence of the effect Bartleby has had on the lawyer is supplied by the short epilogue attached to Bartleby's "biography." Often skimmed or seriously misread as appended solely to satisfy some supposed interest we may have (according to the narrator) with respect to "who Bartleby was" or "the manner of life he led," clearly the real reason for its inclusion by the narrator is to help himself (and the reader) find out who *he* is and what manner of life *he* lives. Otherwise, there would be no excusing the passage from the charge that it is an "artistic flaw" of the sort that tries to "[take] the reader outside of the confines of the story itself" [Charles G. Hoffman, "The Shorter Fiction of Herman Melville," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 52, 1953]. For notwithstanding the narrator's assumptions to the contrary, the reader of literature no more *needs* nor wishes such "real" information about literary characters than he needs or wishes fictional information about real people. In literature, the engagement of our moral and aesthetic senses points our interest less towards how characters may exist "outside the confines of the story" than towards the consideration of how such lives affect those which they touch *in* the narrative.

From this point of view, the function of the "sequel" is clearly to confirm how profound and lasting and morally chastening was Bartleby's effect on the lawyer. For, first, we learn from the epilogue that the Bartleby

"episode" had occurred perhaps years before this narrative was written: the information about the Dead Letter Office came to the narrator's ear "a few months after the scrivener's decease" and he confesses that he "could never ascertain. . . how true it is." This fact, of course, requires us to ask why he is telling the story at all. And why after all this time? Surely, Melville intends us to see that his narrator is seeking some kind of release here: like Dostoevsky's Underground Man or Lagerkvist's tortured Barababas, or (once again the analogy is irresistible) Coleridge's Mariner, an agony constantly "burns" within his heart, as it will do until he "teaches his tale."

Second, the power and permanence of Bartleby's effect on the lawyer are demonstrated by his very anxiousness, also revealed here in the sequel, desperately to grasp for scraps of information about Bartleby, an anxiety which has, apparently never diminished over time. And when he *did* learn something, we can't help but notice what a powerful impact it had on him, one which he clearly wants to share with his readers. Nor can his thoughts on the subject of Bartleby in the Dead Letter Office be considered those of a "cool. . . eminently *safe* man": ". . . hardly can I express the emotions which seize me," he exclaims in passion: "Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?"

And now comes the third point: the narrator clearly shows, in his summing up at the end of the epilogue, that he *has* learned what all our Bartlebys have to teach us: the dread, fatal consequences of human alienation. We cannot, surely, resist the notion which is so powerfully suggested by these concluding sentences that the narrator has truly struggled to arise redemptively to a view of love and charity embraced by the Sermon on the Mount:

Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a banknote sent in swiftest charity—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved circumstances. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.

Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!

Are these sentiments, as Hershel Parker has called them [in "The 'Sequel' in 'Bartleby,'" in *Bartleby the Inscrutable*, edited by Thomas M. Inge, 1979], merely "sententious"? Is their expression simply a matter of the narrator allowing himself to "feel a gentle, superior sadness, a delicious melancholy"? Do these concluding words merely serve to "reduce his experience with the strange scrivener to manageable, non-unpleasing terms" in order to "show that he is at last in control?" What textual reason is there to read this passage ironically? Surely, there is far too much evidence both here and in the narrative that the lawyer has undergone a strong spiritual challenge to raise the possibility that Melville would end the story so cynically. For granting that the lawyer *failed* Bartleby in some important way, and that he was in fact the deadest of the dead letters, it is also true that he now *knows* how weak he was. He also knows that his actions, when he *did* act, were just funeral flowers: beautiful, well-meant, but uselessly after the fact. The very telling of the tale attests to such knowledge. And so, although he may, like the magi in Eliot's poem, finally return to his little kingdom, his walled-in life, his triplicate non-existence, his straitened world of Turkeys, Nippers, Ginger-Nuts, he will have been changed greatly by this painfully acquired knowledge.

"How can a man be born when he is old?"

The question is asked of the Christ by the night-visiting Nicodemus. It is a question Bartleby's elderly biographer will carry with him heavily, as he stumbles in wonderment towards his own dark, private Tombs.

Bartleby, the Scrivener Melville, Herman: Further Reading

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Criticism

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Abrams, Robert E. " 'Bartleby' and the Fragile Pageantry of the Ego." *ELH* 45, No. 3 (Fall 1978): 488-500.

Argues that the mystery of the self is evidenced in enigmatic Bartleby, who lacks the social façade that disguises the true self of most individuals.

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Emery, Allan Moore. "The Alternatives of Melville's 'Bartleby.'" *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 31, No. 2 (September 1976): 170-87.

Explores the influence of the philosophers Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Priestly on the themes of freedom and limitation, free will and determinism in "Bartleby, the Scrivener."

Inge, M. Thomas, ed. *Bartleby the Inscrutable: A Collection of Commentary on Herman Melville's Tale "Bartleby the Scrivener."* Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1979, 238 p.

Anthology of criticism providing "a representative sampling of some of the most provocative critical essays published on 'Bartleby, the Scrivener,' along with four more recent essays especially commissioned for this book."

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Marler, Robert F. " 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' and the American Short Story." *Genre* VI, No. 4 (December 1973): 428-47.

Contends that "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is perhaps the first modern American short story, as distinguished from the type of short fiction known as the tale, because it avoids the moralism, allegory, romantic characterization, and other traits of the tale. Marler concludes that the narrator is the main character and not a villain.

McCall, Dan. *The Silence of Bartleby*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989, 206 p.

Book-length study that employs a different critical approach to "Bartleby, the Scrivener" in each chapter. The chapters are entitled "Swimming through Libraries," " 'A Little *Luny*,'" " 'A Passive Resistance,'" " 'Hawthorne: A Problem,'" and "The Reliable Narrator."

Miller, Lewis H., Jr. " 'Bartleby' and the Dead Letter." *Studies in American Fiction* 8, No. 1 (Spring 1980): 1-12.

Demonstrates that language in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" belies the narrator's assessment of the events related by him. Miller further asserts that the story's concluding account of Bartleby's previous position in a dead letter office "provides a definitive ironic perspective from which to view the narrator."

Norman, Liane. "Bartleby and the Reader." *The New England Quarterly* XLIV, No. 1 (March 1971): 22-39.

Contends that the reader is encouraged by Melville to identify with the lawyer until the lawyer's attitudes are revealed to have philosophic shortcomings.

Perry, Dennis R. " 'Ah, Humanity': Compulsion Neuroses in Melville's 'Bartleby.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 24, No. 4 (Fall 1987): 407-15.

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Pribek, Thomas. "Melville's Copyists: The 'Bar-tenders' of Wall Street." *Papers on Language and Literature* 22, No. 2 (Spring 1986): 176-86.

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Reinert, Otto. "Bartleby the Inscrutable: Notes on a Melville Motif." In *Americana Norvegica: Norwegian Contributions to American Studies*, Vol. I, edited by Sigmund Skard and Henry H. Wasser, pp. 180-205. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966.

Interpretation focusing on the existentialist dimension of "Bartleby, the Scrivener," particularly as manifested in Bartleby's "passive endurance" and the recognition that the lawyer and Bartleby are "both protagonist and antagonist, both victim and victimizer." Reinert also considers the story in relation to Melville's other works that treat existentialist concerns.

Roundy, Nancy. "That Is All I Know of Him . . .": Epistemology and Art in Melville's 'Bartleby.'" *Essays in Arts and Sciences* IX, No. 1 (May 1980): 33-43.

Presents the narrator of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" as an artist who has been positively altered by his creative act, storytelling: "His sympathies have been awakened, his knowledge broadened, and his story is effective because of this change. From mere perception to imaginative vision—this is the lawyer's route, in his achievement of balanced art."

Schechter, Harold. "Bartleby the Chronometer." *Studies in Short Fiction* 19, No. 4 (Fall 1982): 359-66.

Argues that by earthly standards the lawyer in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is a morally upright man, but his treatment of Bartleby demonstrates that the lawyer falls far short of heavenly standards and adherence to "Christ's precepts."

Shusterman, David. "The 'Reader Fallacy' and 'Bartleby the Scrivener.'" *The New England Quarterly* XLV, No. 1 (March 1972): 118-24.

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Silver, Allan. "The Lawyer and the Scrivener." *Partisan Review* XLVIII, No. 3 (1981): 409-24.

Viewing the lawyer as the "sole center of experience and meaning" in "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Silver focuses on the character's moral, social, and professional obligations to Bartleby.

Vincent, Howard P., ed. *Melville Annual 1965, a Symposium: "Bartleby the Scrivener."* Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 199 p.

Collection of diverse essays on "Bartleby, the Scrivener," including discussions by a psychiatrist, a filmmaker, and a musician whose critical approaches reflect their respective fields of knowledge. A secondary bibliography and a facsimile reprinting of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" are included in the volume.

Widmer, Kingsley. "The Negative Affirmation: Melville's 'Bartleby.'" *Modern Fiction Studies* VIII, No. 3 (Autumn 1962): 276-86.

Perceiving Bartleby as "mutedly demonic," "nihilistic," and "a specter of irrational will" and the narrator-attorney as "pragmatically moral" and "a liberal rationalist," Widmer states: "All the civilized

decency of the narrator fails to adequately confront Bartleby, and this indicts the best traditions of moral reasonableness, in Melville's time and in ours."

Wilson, James C. " 'Bartleby': The Walls of Wall Street." *Arizona Quarterly* 37, No. 4 (Winter 1981): 335-46.

Explicating "Bartleby, the Scrivener" as "one of the bitterest indictments of American capitalism ever published," Wilson attempts to show that Bartleby is reduced from a human being to an abstract concept of humanity by the narrator and the world of Wall Street.

Additional coverage of Melville's life and career is contained in the following sources published by Gale Research: *Contemporary Dictionary of American Literary Biography, 1640-1865*; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vols. 3, 74; *DISCovering Authors; Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, Vols. 3, 12, 29, 45; *Short Story Criticism*, Vol. 1; *Something about the Author*, Vol. 59; and *World Literature Criticism*.

Essays and Criticism: Multiple Meanings and Interpretations

Almost one hundred and fifty years since it was first published, Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" remains one of the most elusive short stories in all of American literature. What is the reason for Bartleby's strange behavior in the story? This is the question that plagues the story's narrator, and it has plagued the readers of "Bartleby the Scrivener" as well. While many intriguing hypotheses have been offered over the years, no single interpretation dominates critical opinion or seems to be an issue of 1853. It was republished three years later in Melville's collection of short stories titled *The Piazza Tales*. Written during Melville's decline in popularity, "Bartleby the Scrivener" attracted little attention when it first appeared. Since the rebirth of Melville scholarship in the twentieth century, however, this story has become widely considered a great work of short fiction.

Although contemporary critics have been unanimous in their praise of "Bartleby the Scrivener" as a work of genius, there has been little agreement about the meaning of the story. Leo Marx's 1953 article "Melville's Parable of the Wall" argues that the character of Bartleby was autobiographical in nature. In Marx's opinion, Melville saw himself as a nonconformist who preferred not to copy the conventional fiction of his day, much as Bartleby refused to copy legal documents. Alternatively, in his 1962 essay, "Melville's Bartleby as Psychological Double," Mordecai Marcus suggests that the character of Bartleby functions to remind the lawyer of his repressed hatred of his own life. Marcus believes that the story was meant as a devastating criticism of the sterile and monotonous business world inhabited by men like the lawyer, who responds with honor to witnessing his "psychological double" act out his hidden desires.

Many critics of "Bartleby the Scrivener" have attempted to psychoanalyze the title character. Bartleby has been interpreted variously as schizophrenic, neurotic, manic depressive, and autistic. Bartleby has also been compared to Jesus Christ. Donald M. Fiene's 1970 essay "Bartleby the Christ" suggests that Bartleby is a Christ figure because his death results from the lawyer's failure to extend Christian charity to him. In "Dead Letters and Dead Men: Narrative Purpose in 'Bartleby the Scrivener,'" (1990) Thomas Mitchell argues that the story is really about the lawyer. Mitchell offers an interpretation that is sympathetic to the lawyer's point of view and suggests that the lawyer ultimately rejects Bartleby's nihilism, or belief in nothing. Finally, David Kuebrich's 1996 article, "Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in 'Bartleby,'" argues that the story is about class conflict and demonstrates the author's intention. Indeed, part of "Bartleby's" enduring appeal comes from its well-crafted ambiguity and denial of easy interpretation. Such an enigmatic story by one of America's greatest writers has proved an irresistible challenge to scholars in numerous fields, including literature, history, philosophy, psychology, and religion. These various approaches to "Bartleby" have deepened our understanding of the issues in the story, even if they have not solved the

riddle of Bartleby's behavior. Perhaps to understand the story one must first accept that there is no single meaning to the character of Bartleby. This essay will consider Bartleby's actions in light of the possibility that his ultimate meaning is not meant to be understood by the reader.

Let us briefly examine one of the most influential interpretations of "Bartleby the Scrivener." In a 1953 essay Leo Marx argued that the character of Bartleby symbolically represents Melville himself, who resisted the pressure to write the kind of unoriginal, formulaic fiction that could provide him with a comfortable living. Marx believed that "Bartleby" was Melville's testament to the misunderstood artist who refuses to "copy" popular forms—as Bartleby refused to copy legal documents—and who suffers rejection and alienation from society on account of his independence. It is tempting to interpret the story in this fashion because, undoubtedly, Melville was something of a Bartleby. Throughout his life, Melville felt himself an outcast from society and looked askance at America's self-confident republic. His innocence was shaken by his father's financial ruin and early death, which led to Melville's years of aimlessness as a sailor. Even after he obtained a good reputation and a steady income as a writer, Melville remained unfulfilled. He constantly challenged his readers with difficult works that betrayed an unpopular degree of pessimism about the state of humanity. Melville refused to change his message despite the consequences, as he complained to author Nathaniel Hawthorne: "Dollars damn me ... What I feel most moved to write, that is banned—it will not pay. Yet ... write the other way I cannot." Or, as Marx would have it, Melville would prefer not.

Like many who have interpreted "Bartleby," Marx sheds some important light on the story, but he does not explain enough. Unlike Melville's, Bartleby's resistance is entirely passive. Bartleby takes no action and offers no overt criticism of society or even a reason for his actions. Bartleby cannot communicate his ideas or feelings in any form except the inadequate statement, "I prefer not to." Bartleby's strange unwillingness to articulate his feelings casts serious doubt on the argument that he represents the uncompromising artist. Bartleby is described as eerily "mechanical" and "inhuman." Unlike Bartleby, Melville never became mentally or socially paralyzed. Moreover, his feelings of pessimism about society never reached the tragic depths that appear to affect Bartleby. The effort it took to create Melville's works of fiction demonstrate that he must have had at least a glimmer of hope that they could somehow make a difference to the world.

Bartleby's alienation seems somewhat greater and more universal than Melville's, yet his silence ensures that the meaning of his resistance will remain ambiguous to the end. Considering Melville's ability as a writer, it is fair to say that the difficulties presented by the character of Bartleby are there for a reason. Why did Melville create this inscrutable character? Some clues can be gathered from a recognition of Melville's own philosophical angst and his use of symbolism. Bartleby functions in the story not as a character but as a symbol. It may be useful to compare Bartleby the symbol to another highly ambiguous creation of Melville's imagination—Moby Dick. Of all of Melville's characters, only the white whale, Moby Dick, presents the same interpretive difficulties as Bartleby and has been construed in as many different ways. In the novel *Moby Dick*, each of Melville's characters interprets the white whale differently, and its ultimate meaning seems both awesome and unknowable. The inscrutability of the white whale reflects Melville's own skepticism about the inability of human beings to fully comprehend and control the forces in the universe at a time when faith in science and human reason were rarely questioned. Ahab, who accepts no limits on man's ability to know, sums up the white whale's elusive meaning when he explains his hatred of the whale: "How can a prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there is naught beyond. We thing is chiefly what I hate; and be that white whale agent, or be that white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him." It is significant that Ahab compares Moby Dick to a wall. Ahab desires to know the ultimate meaning of all things, but he is frustrated because he cannot penetrate beyond the surfaces of the tangible world. For Ahab, existence in this world is but a prison because he cannot know, and sometimes doubts, that any deeper meaning exists. Thus, all that is left to Ahab is to attack and destroy the inscrutable surfaces which he has personified in the white whale.

In "Bartleby the Scrivener," Melville explores similar philosophical issues in a different kind of setting. In a striking parallel with Ahab, Bartleby is also transfixed by walls, a pervasive symbol in the story. The office is located on Wall Street, and its windows look out onto walls on all sides. Bartleby has a tendency to stare blankly at the wall, lost in what the lawyer calls "a deadwall reverie," and his fate is to eventually die in prison, his face turned to the wall. It could be argued that, like Ahab, the walls symbolize Bartleby's sense of imprisonment within the limits of human knowledge, but we can never know this for sure. Like Moby Dick, Bartleby himself is also a kind of wall. To others he presents an inscrutable facade beyond which ultimate meaning is unknown. Bartleby, in fact, assumes the same symbolic function as Moby Dick, and the drama unfolds in the narration of the lawyer, who tries to comprehend him. No grand egotist like Ahab, the lawyer confronts the inscrutable Bartleby from the perspective of a typical genteel American whose comfortable existence has given him no reason for philosophical angst. As Bartleby's behavior causes his ordinary world of routine and unshaken "assumptions" to collapse, the lawyer is forced to confront issues about the human condition from which he had been previously sheltered.

All the reader knows about Bartleby is learned through the point of view of the lawyer. Thus, it may be worth considering that what Bartleby "really means" is not as important as what he means to the lawyer. At first, the lawyer is miffed at Bartleby's refusal to proofread documents, and he attempts to make him aware of the traditional practices and "common usages" of the office. Throughout the story, the lawyer continually attempts to explain Bartleby's behavior within a rational framework. The lawyer supposes in turn that Bartleby does not understand the rules of the office; Bartleby's resistance is just a minor eccentricity that can be controlled like Turkey's and Nipper's; Bartleby ails physically from a poor diet or bad light; and, finally, Bartleby has been deeply affected by a previous job experience. None of his explanations are satisfactory, however. The lawyer himself reacts with growing horror and confusion as the seriousness of the problem becomes clear, especially when considering Bartleby's total solitude. At this point, it becomes evident that Bartleby's behavior has begun to take on deeper symbolic significance for the lawyer. "How can a person exist without communication with others?" he wonders when he realizes that Bartleby neither converses with other people nor reads. "Is it possible to be so utterly alone in the universe?" Bartleby's actions and demeanor suggest to the lawyer, perhaps for the first time, that existence has no meaning or purpose and it is possible that we live in a cold and indifferent universe.

Once the lawyer has contemplated the meaning of Bartleby, he begins to make an effort to dispel the mystery and establish some human connection that will restore confidence in his optimistic view of life. He begins by trying to discover something about Bartleby's past, assuring Bartleby that he "feels friendly" towards him. This fails, but later in the story the lawyer tries again to reach Bartleby when he points out that life offers him choices and questions him as to what he would "prefer" to do with his life. Yet this tactic also fails, as Bartleby refuses to differentiate between the "choices" he is offered, saying with indifference that he is not particular. Finally, the lawyer offers to take Bartleby in and care for him. Again, this offer of kindness and human sympathy fails to impress Bartleby, who would rather remain in the doorway. In these scenes a conflict emerges between the lawyer's optimistic and reassuring view of the universe and what he perceives as Bartleby's nihilism. The fact that the lawyer perceives a profound meaninglessness and existential despair in Bartleby's actions may suggest that buried deep within his own optimistic and superficial world view there exists (at least) a lingering doubt.

Many critics have regarded Melville's lawyer as a buffoonish parody of the American middle class. Yet if the philosophical conflict between the lawyer and Bartleby is taken seriously, then one must reconsider whether Melville really views his lawyer with contempt. Melville, as I have argued, never totally succumbed to his pessimism, as Bartleby seems to. Is there something of value, then, in the lawyer's critique of Bartleby? In one of the most significant passages in the story, the lawyer visits Bartleby at the prison. He finds Bartleby standing alone in the prison courtyard, staring intently at the stone wall. The lawyer attempts to tear Bartleby's attention from the wall, stating, "see, it is not so sad a place as one might think. Look, there is the sky, and here is the grass." Without looking, Bartleby responds, "I know where I am." The contrast between their value

systems is made clear: even if it is true that the human condition is a prison, the lawyer will optimistically focus his attention on the sky and the grass, while all Bartleby can think of are the walls that shut him in. Unable to accept what he perceives as Bartleby's point of view, the lawyer eventually decides that Bartleby must have been adversely affected by an experience which forced him to constantly contemplate the hopelessness and sad ironies of life. By "assorting for the flames" those dead letters which lawyer imagines would bring "hope to the unhoping" and comfort for the "despairing," Bartleby somehow lost faith. This conclusion suggests that the lawyer will carry on believing in something, however superficial, despite his contact with Bartleby.

In *Bartleby* Melville created a highly ambiguous symbol that cannot be reduced to a single meaning or interpretation. Melville thus places the reader in much the same position as the lawyer in the story. It is somewhat ironic that most critics of the story have dismissed the lawyer's interpretation of Bartleby as inaccurate while advancing their own as correct. It may be that the lawyer's interpretation is the only one that matters. When confronted with an experience that shakes his comfortable world view, the lawyer becomes anxious and fearful but finally regards Bartleby sentimentally as a fellow "son of Adam" who has mysteriously lost his way. It is not unlikely that Melville had some sympathy for the lawyer's resolution of the matter. By finally leaving questions of ultimate meaning unresolved, the lawyer restores his own faith through a simple expression of empathy for Bartleby's suffering. It is not philosophically profound, but it is undeniably human.

Source: Mark Elliott, "An Overview of 'Bartleby the Scrivener'," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 1998.

Elliott is a Ph.D. student in history at New York University and a former editor of "New England Puritan Literature" for the *Cambridge History of American Literature*.

Analysis: Bartleby the Scrivener

On his third day as scrivener for a lawyer on Wall Street, Bartleby tells his employer that he "prefers not to" copy any more legal documents. This enigmatic response becomes the scrivener's constant reply to further requests for copy work.

While Bartleby's passive resistance toward work angers the lawyer, it also arouses his pity. The scrivener is given six days to leave his job, but he prefers not to leave. Distraught with emotion for this "wreck in the mid Atlantic," the lawyer asks Bartleby to move in with him. This request does not meet the scrivener's preference.

The lawyer finally decides to rid himself of Bartleby. He moves his business to an address unknown to the scrivener. The lawyer later learns that Bartleby, refusing to leave his previous "home," has been declared a vagrant and sent to prison. Here, Bartleby is further surrounded by walls. He responds by choosing not to eat his rations.

Bartleby represents Melville's concept of man's existence. Placed in a world with societal expectations, the man who prefers not to conform may retreat into his own "Walden Pond." However, Bartleby, the former dead-letter office clerk, chooses not to protect himself from those who label him a threat to their materially oriented world.

Similar to Thoreau, who does not escape the tax collector at Walden, Bartleby pays a dear price for his individual preference.

Analysis: Style and Technique

Wall imagery dominates this “story of Wall Street.” The narrator describes the location of his chambers in detail. At one end is seen the white wall of a large skylight shaft: “This view might have been considered . . . deficient in what landscape painters call ‘life.’” At the other end is an ugly brick wall, blackened by age, ten feet from the window. Bartleby’s desk is inside the lawyer’s office, so that he can be within easy call, but is in a corner by a small window, which “commanded at present no view at all” because another wall is three feet from the panes. Bartleby stares at this wall when he prefers not to work. He is separated from his fellow copyists by a ground-glass door and is isolated from his employer, “a satisfactory arrangement,” by a high, green folding screen, suggesting the lawyer’s monetary obsession. Thus, there are walls within walls within walls within Wall Street.

The impossibility of the absence of walls is emphasized when Bartleby is removed to the Tombs, where he ignores the limited space in the exercise yard, choosing to stand beside the exterior wall, which both keeps him and protects him from society. He dies there curled into the fetal position (suggesting a possible tomb-womb pun), as if he could return to a state of innocence only in death.

These walls represent more than mere isolation; they are barriers to communication, to understanding, especially in a story told by a man who understands much less than he thinks he does. As in Melville’s greatest achievement, *Moby Dick* (1851), the walls imply that humankind is incapable of true perception, that understanding the purpose of existence is impossible.

The other major stylistic device employed by Melville is his unreliable narrator, who sees only what is on the surface. It is ironic that in his quest for the easy explanation he decides that Bartleby refuses to work because something is wrong with his eyes. Melville helps establish the tradition of having a tale told by someone who is accurate about facts but who is very subjective in interpreting the motivations not only of others but also of himself. This self-justifying narrator creates the story’s irony, its humor, its greatness.

Analysis: Historical Context

The Triumph of Capitalism

At the time Melville wrote “Bartleby the Scrivener,” New York City was firmly entrenched as the financial center of the United States’s economy. It had been the nation’s leading port during the colonial era, and by the mid-nineteenth century, New York overflowed with banks, credit institutions, insurance companies, brokerage houses, and a thriving stock exchange—all of which put its business community at the forefront of the “organizational revolution” in American economic institutions. By the 1850s, the development of capitalism in New York had matured to the extent that open conflict emerged between wage laborers and capitalists in the form of strikes and street violence. As early as the 1830s, artisans and skilled workers formed trade unions to resist the methods of factory production and wage labor. These craftspeople resented being run out of business by rich capitalists who undercut their trade by selling cheap, mass-produced goods. In addition, wage workers lamented the disappearance of the old relationship between master craftsmen and apprentices. Before the advent of factory production, most skilled workers learned their trade under a master craftsman, who usually took them in and paid for their room, board, and education. This close bond between employer and employee became defunct when machine-oriented factory production eliminated the need for skilled workers, requiring instead a large supply of hourly paid, unskilled laborers. Whereas they had once inhabited the same quarters, now an immense social divide had arisen between laborers and their capitalist employers. New York’s merchants and financiers formed the most conspicuous aristocracy of wealth in the country. These businessmen, like the famous John Jacob Astor and Andrew Carnegie, dominated the city’s political and social life and became notorious for their opulence. In “Bartleby the Scrivener,” Melville’s narrator comments wistfully on how the very name John Jacob Astor “rings like unto bullion.” Melville’s intimate legal office,

with its three scribes (who can be classified as semi-skilled workers), contains elements of both the old and new economic systems.

The Coming of the Civil War

The most pressing political concern of the United States in the 1850s involved the growing conflict between the North and the South, which culminated in 1861 into the Civil War. The Compromise of 1850 had not only failed to settle fundamental disputes over slavery but had worsened them. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe was published in 1853, one year before "Bartleby the Scrivener" appeared in *Putnam's Magazine*. Stowe's immensely popular novel expressed the deep repulsion that many Northerners felt toward the institution of slavery and implicitly celebrated the "free" society of the North. Southern politicians responded to Stowe's attack by condemning what they referred to as the "wage slavery" of the Northern factory system. These Southerners claimed that the condition of a wage laborer was worse than enslavement on a Southern plantation. In debates over slavery, politicians and intellectuals were often faced with the difficult task of defining the meaning of freedom in America. Melville addressed the theme of freedom vs. slavery in several works, including *Benito Cereno*, "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," and "Bartleby the Scrivener." Abraham Lincoln suggested that freedom meant the "right to rise and better [one's] conditions in life." By 1856, pitched battles had broken out in Kansas between slaveholders and non-slaveholders, which increased the likelihood of a full-scale civil war. This fate was sealed when a reputed abolitionist, Abraham Lincoln, was elected President in 1860.

Philosophical Trends

In April of 1853, a few months before Melville wrote "Bartleby the Scrivener," the first English translation of the works of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer appeared in a respected English periodical. Schopenhauer believed that the human will is superior to knowledge. He suggested, however, that the only way for the will to free itself from society and human law is to practice an asceticism that demanded a total withdrawal from society. Schopenhauer imagined that the ideal man destroys life's illusions through inaction. Only by gradually extinguishing all connection with the world around him can Schopenhauer's hero perform the supreme act of individual will. It is unknown whether Melville was acquainted with this idea.

Analysis: Literary Style

Setting

The setting of "Bartleby the Scrivener" is a crucial element in the story because it underscores Melville's concern about the effects of capitalism on American society. Significantly, the story is set on Wall Street in New York City, which had become the center of American financial and business life by the 1850s. The values of Wall Street are central to the story. The lawyer, who serves as the narrator, has an unabashed reverence for "the late John Jacob Astor," who was regarded as the most successful businessman of his time. The lawyer also reflects the values of Wall Street in his concern over such relatively superficial aspects of his employees as their appearance and dress. The work-oriented atmosphere of the office is devoid of friendliness and a sense of community. Indeed, the environment of Wall Street itself, Melville points out, is so business-oriented that after working hours it is reduced to an empty space "entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations." Melville's descriptions of Wall Street convey a cold and alienating setting where the forging of close human ties is difficult.

Point of View

Melville's use of an unreliable narrator is the stylistic technique most remarked upon by literary scholars who have examined "Bartleby the Scrivener." By relating the narrative from the lawyer's point of view, Melville adds a level of complexity to the story that greatly enhances the number of ways it can be interpreted. As a narrator, the lawyer is unreliable because the reader cannot always trust his interpretation of events. The lawyer, as he himself admits, is a man of "assumptions," and his prejudices often prevent him from offering an

accurate view of the situation. This becomes clear early in the story when the lawyer's description of Turkey's unpredictable behavior in the afternoons begs the obvious conclusion that he drinks during his lunch hour. Yet the lawyer is evasive about the matter, perhaps intentionally so. Thus, when the lawyer interprets Bartleby's behavior, the reader must decide carefully whether or not the lawyer is accurately perceiving events. The story is full of ironic scenes, among them when the lawyer compliments himself on his deft handling of Bartleby's dismissal after it has become clear to the reader that his efforts have been futile. Some critics argue that the story is really more about the lawyer than about Bartleby. Certainly the narrator's clouded perspective makes it all the more difficult to unlock the mystery of Bartleby's behavior.

Symbolism

The two most significant symbols in "Bartleby the Scrivener" are walls and dead letters. Walls are pervasive in the story. The office is located on Wall Street, and its windows look out onto walls on all sides. Bartleby has a tendency to stare blankly at the wall, lost in what the lawyer calls "a dead-wall reverie." The walls symbolize Bartleby's psychological imprisonment. Significantly, his fate is to die in prison. Why does Bartleby feel trapped, or "walled off" from society? There are perhaps many answers to this question, but one is suggested by the intriguing symbol of "dead letters" which the lawyer offers at the end of the story. The lawyer believes that the depressing experience of having worked in the United States Dead Letter Office may have affected Bartleby's state of mind. To the lawyer, the "dead letters" represent words of comfort or charity that arrived too late to serve their purpose; as he puts it, "pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping." These symbols of failed communication reflect Bartleby's sense of isolation from society and the failure of the lawyer, or anyone else, to reach him.

Ambiguity

The works of Herman Melville are famous for being deliberately ambiguous, or unclear. Once considered a stylistic flaw, ambiguity is now recognized as a literary device in which the author employs words, symbols, or plot constructions that have two or more distinct meanings. By constructing multiple layers of possible meaning within his story, Melville frustrates those readers who seek an obvious message. Typically, Melville forces his readers to consider his characters and events from more than one perspective. For instance, not only is Bartleby's behavior never fully explained, but it is filtered through the distorted perspective of the lawyer, whose own behavior is somewhat mysterious. Moreover, the lawyer's unexpected concluding words, in which he compares the plight of Bartleby to the plight of all humankind, offers another possible meaning to the events that have passed and causes the reader to reevaluate the entire story. The result is a narrative that remains open to many interpretations.

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

1850s: Conflicts between labor and management are not uncommon. The U.S. economy is growing rapidly, largely at the expense of unskilled and semi-skilled laborers. Unions are beginning to form on the national level. Local unions also gain more power and represent workers from a variety of crafts and trades. During this period of development, labor organizers begin to make distinctions between skilled and unskilled workers.

1990s: Though not as powerful as they were in previous decades, labor unions continue to exert their power in order to improve working conditions and wages for their members. In 1997, United Parcel Service (UPS) goes on strike and cripples many other industries that rely on UPS for delivery of their products. Teamsters President Ron Carey describes the strike's settlement as "a victory over corporate greed."

1850s: The narrator states that Ginger Nut, the office boy, earns one dollar a week. Wages during this time are quite low. In 1860, the average fanner makes 88 cents per day and works 66 hours a week.

1990s: While the position of law copyist held by Bartleby, Turkey, and Nippers no longer exists, similar modern professions include legal secretaries and paralegals. A legal secretary helps prepare legal documents for lawyers and earns between \$16,400 and \$36,000 a year. Paralegals do much of the background work for lawyers, including legal research, and earn between \$14,000 and \$39,000 a year.

Analysis: Topics for Further Study

Because of Bartleby's obvious maladjustment to society, many critics have used the character as a case study for psychoanalysis. How would you diagnose Bartleby's behavior? How would you diagnose the behavior of the lawyer?

Investigate the social conditions of New York City during the 1850s. How did class conflict play a role in the day-to-day life of most New Yorkers? What were conditions like for office workers on Wall Street?

Melville is considered by many to be a deeply philosophical novelist. Using the story of "Bartleby the Scrivener," examine Melville's attitude toward one of the following philosophical movements: the Enlightenment, transcendentalism, Romanticism, idealism, nihilism.

Research attitudes about conformity in American business life by relying on sociological studies or literary works. How have such attitudes changed over time?

Analysis: Media Adaptations

Bartleby is a 1970 film adaptation of Melville's story starring Paul Scofield, John McEnery, Thorly Walters, and Colm Jeavons, and directed by Anthony Friedman. The film was produced by Pantheon, distributed by British Lion, and is 78 minutes.

The film *A Discussion of Herman Melville's Bartleby* was produced by Encyclopaedia Britannica Educational Corp. in 1969, and accompanies the film *Bartleby by Herman Melville*, produced by the company that same year.

Bartleby, a motion picture by AudioVisual Services, 1962, is also based on Melville's story.

"Bartleby the Scrivener" is available on audio-cassette read by Milton R. Stern as part of the Everett Edwards 1971 series, 19th-century American Writers. 39 minutes.

A filmstrip and cassette of "Bartleby the Scrivener" was produced by PrenticeHall Media in 1977.

Analysis: What Do I Read Next?

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Celestial Railroad" (1843) is a nineteenth-century retelling of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Hawthorne parodies Americans' self-confident belief in progress without moral consequences. Hawthorne's work had a significant influence on Herman Melville and dealt with many similar themes.

Melville's 1855 story "The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids" takes another look at the social effects of capitalism, emphasizing shifting gender roles. Melville's repulsion toward the New England paper factories is explicit, and his descriptions of dehumanized factory workers can be compared to his descriptions of Bartleby.

Tom Wolfe's 1987 novel *Bonfire of the Vanities* concerns greed and moral corruption on Wall Street in the prosperous 1980s. In recounting the protagonist's downfall, Wolfe examines the class structure and justice system of New York City.

Melville's 1857 novel *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* explores the psychological and philosophical aspects of human relations in a heterogeneous, capitalist society. Like "Bartleby," this highly experimental work presents numerous difficulties to the reader but remains a powerful meditation on American society in the 1850s.

Karen Halttunen's historical study *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*, examines the fears of middle-class Americans about the dangers of a capitalist society. Using Melville's "Confidence-Man" as her central model, Halttunen shows how American attitudes toward honesty and deception have changed over time. See especially her chapter "The Confidence-Man in Corporate America" for an interpretation of American business culture.

David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denny's *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950) is a sociological study of the complex relationship between economics and personality development. This work traces the "dominant personality types" that have corresponded to the three major phases of American economic history. The issue of conformity vs. character development in business life is central to their analysis of American history.

In his prize-winning study *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (1984), Sean Wilentz traces the rise of capitalism and the creation of an industrial working class in New York City. He examines the role of working-class radicals and their resistance to the capitalist system in the early years of the Industrial Revolution.

"The Beast in the Jungle," a 1903 story by American writer Henry James, provides an interesting comparison to Melville's literary techniques in "Bartleby the Scrivener." The story presents a psychological drama from the viewpoint of an unusually unreliable narrator who attempts to interpret the actions of those around him.

"The Secret Sharer" (1909) by Joseph Conrad is the story of a sea captain who harbors a possibly murderous stowaway on his ship. The story concerns the theme of the "doppelganger," or psychological double, that some critics have suggested is evident in Melville's work.

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