Herman Melville
"Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street"

I. About the Author

Herman Melville (1819–91), today hailed as one of America's greatest writers, had in his own time a very mixed career. Some of his early sea stories and sea adventures were esteemed by the public, but his epic (and to him, most significant) novel, *Moby-Dick* (1851), was very badly received. Indeed, after it appeared, Melville became something of a pariah in the literary world. Turning to poetry, he encountered similar neglect. In the last quarter-century of his life, he wrote little and published less. (*Billy Budd*, today regarded as one of his finest works, was published posthumously.) Friends feared for his sanity. His wife's family tried not only to get her to leave him but also to have him committed as insane. He wound up working for nineteen years as a customs inspector in New York, and when he died, he seemed destined for obscurity. One might therefore wonder whether his tale about the mysterious Bartleby is, among other things, intended as a profoundly disheartening allegory about the artist's—and his own—relation to our commercial, democratic society. But that, of course, depends on what you think the story says and means.

II. Summary

The basic plot is rather simple: a middling Wall Street lawyer—also the narrator of the story—needing more assistance, hires a new scrivener (copyist) to join his firm. Enter Bartleby. Although initially very productive in his copying, after three days he calmly refuses when asked to help with proofreading or any other office tasks: "I would prefer not to" is his reply, one repeated more than twenty times in the story. The lawyer and his other employees are shocked, but Bartleby holds fast: he prefers not to. Both touched and

disconcerted yet choosing not to fire him, the lawyer is strangely drawn into *coping* with Bartleby and his growing refusals and eccentricities—the theme of the rest of the story.

Bartleby, we learn, is always in the office, either incessantly working or staring out the window at a facing wall. On a chance Sunday visit to the office, the lawyer discovers that Bartleby also *lives* there. Eventually Bartleby's refusals extend also to his work as a copyist: he prefers not to do any work, yet he prefers not to quit the office. The lawyer, waffling between pity and indignation, finally asks him—bribes him—to leave, then later commands him to leave his office. But Bartleby prefers not to. Instead, the lawyer moves his office, leaving Bartleby behind.

Another lawyer moves into the building and quickly learns that Bartleby comes with the territory. He complains to the narrator, who disclaims any responsibility for him. The new proprietor has Bartleby arrested for vagrancy, and he is imprisoned in "the Tombs," officially known as the Halls of Justice (33). There, too, he prefers not to, including "not to eat." The narrator visits Bartleby but can't get through to him. On his next visit, the narrator finds Bartleby lying dead, huddled against a wall in the prison yard.

At the very end, in a brief coda, the narrator informs us of a late-arriving rumor to the effect that Bartleby had previously worked as a clerk in an obscure branch of the Post Office known as the Dead Letter Office, sorting through undeliverable mail—mail that would have brought hoped-for news and gifts to people who died with their hopes unfulfilled.

III. Thinking about the Text

Unlike its basic plot, the story's meaning and implications are far from simple. So we will proceed slowly, starting with what we learn of the characters and then moving to the heart of the story, the relationship between Bartleby and the lawyer. We conclude this section by attending to the story's short coda.

A. The Characters

Early in the story, the narrator/lawyer says: "Ere introducing the scrivener [i.e., Bartleby], as he first appeared to me, it is fit I make some mention of myself, my *employés*, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings; because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character [Bartleby] about to be

presented" (2). Following this lead, and limiting ourselves to the first five pages of the story, look at each in turn:

1. The lawyer—what is he like?
   a. What do you make of his "profound conviction" that the easiest life is the best? Do you share this conviction?
   b. What does it mean to be considered by others as "an eminently *safe* man"?
   c. Who is John Jacob Astor? And what we do learn about the narrator from his mention of Astor?
   d. Why does the narrator draw attention to the fact that he received but soon lost the office of "Master of Chancery"?
   e. Why doesn't he tell us his name?
2. The *employés* (i.e., the two scriveners, Turkey and Nippers, and the office boy, Ginger Nut)—what are they like?
   a. What is the work of a scrivener? How does it differ from the work of ancient scribes, who copied holy books?
   b. What do the attitudes and ways of his scriveners tell us about the lawyer as an employer? As a human being?
3. The business—what sort of law does the lawyer practice?
   a. Why does he refer to it as a "snug business"?
4. The chambers and general surroundings—what are they like?

Focusing now on the "advent" of Bartleby (3), describe:

5. Bartleby—what is he like?
   a. Describe the work quarters he has been given.
   b. What would it be like to work in such quarters?

IN CONVERSATION

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Melville's story with Diana Schaub, coeditor of What So Proudly We Hail, *and Wilfred McClay, the SunTrust Bank Chair of Excellence in Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.*

Diana Schaub: The narrator says, "I'm going to tell the story of Bartleby, the Scrivener, but to really understand Bartleby you're going to have to understand

me, and my employees, and my business." He presents himself with a great deal of frankness. He says, "I am an eminently safe man." He makes clear that he is not really ambitious and that this is the source of his very remunerative law business.

Amy Kass: He calls it a *snug* business, so even that is comfortable. There is no risk to be taken there.

Leon Kass: And he puts up with these characters in the office—Turkey, who is an alcoholic who gets violent in the afternoon; Nippers, who is a younger man, ambitious and dyspeptic, and who is violent in the morning; and Ginger Nut, who is a twelve-year-old kid whose father sent him there. Bartleby puts up with these people who, at best, do a half-day's work and are causing difficulty. He puts up with them partly because he does not like confrontation and he will work around their deficiencies—and, after all, when they do work, they do pretty good work. He's an accommodationist.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

B. Bartleby's Conduct with the Lawyer

"It is, of course," the lawyer/narrator explains, "an indispensable part of a scrivener's business to verify the accuracy of his copy, word by word" (8). And, as we soon learn, "common usage and common sense" (10) require copyists to assist, as well, in the proofreading of others' copy and to help out with other office tasks. But when Bartleby is asked, on the third day of his employment, to help proofread a document, he says, "I would prefer not to." And, after twenty-plus other requests, Bartleby makes twenty-plus similar replies. We watch as Bartleby's responses—almost all negative preferences, stated mildly but firmly and without anger or impatience—gradually extend from preferring not to proofread, then to copying anything, then to doing any tasks or activities whatsoever, even eating. He becomes more and more passive, gradually withdrawing more and more into his "hermitage," his "dead-wall reveries," and himself. To the lawyer, he gradually appears more and more like a "ghost," an "apparition," and a "cadaver."

1. How should we regard Bartleby's responses to the lawyer?
2. What do you make of his peculiarities?
3. What does his appearance suggest about his attitude toward other people? Toward work or activity, in general? Toward the world?
4. Why does Bartleby "prefer not to" perform more and more actions throughout the story? Does this say more about the nature of the work or more about the state of his soul?
5. Is there a difference between *stating one's preferences* (negatively or positively) and *imposing one's will*? Does "I would prefer not to" differ from "I will not"?
6. Is it possible to say what moves Bartleby? Or is he a mystery beyond comprehension?
7. Is Bartleby unique? Or are there other "Bartlebys," who—from whatever cause—become passive and passionless beings with largely negative preferences?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: At the first appearance, Bartleby is motionless. When an ad is placed and Bartleby arrives at an open door, he just appears out of nowhere, motionless at the door. He looks incredibly forlorn, like a lost sheep. He is pale, respectable but pale.

He appeals to the lawyer, in part, because, unlike the others in the office, he is not going to make any trouble. In fact, the lawyer has this fantasy that he is going to bring Bartleby into the office and maybe Bartleby's calmness and placidity will spread to the obstreperous other two.

Wilfred McClay: It is said several times that the lawyer is disarmed by Bartleby. And when he does one of those outrageous "I would prefer not to," the lawyer thinks to respond and then he says "Well, something in him just disarmed me." Is it Bartleby's forlornness that does this?

Diana Schaub: Though there are times that the lawyer does respond to Bartleby's forlornness, the lawyer's being disarmed is more the willfulness of Bartleby,

because there is something very willful about his refusals. The lawyer says that he himself operates on assumptions. And those assumptions are usually wrong and then he engages in all these kind of rationalizations, and he uses his prudence and his reason to come up with explanations for why Bartleby is behaving the way he is.

But Bartleby acts, the lawyer comes to realize, just on the basis of preferences. And the preference is always a negative preference: it is never a preference to do something, but is a preference that he would prefer *not* to.

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C. The Lawyer's Conduct toward Bartleby

In responding to Bartleby, the lawyer "rall[ies his] stunned faculties" (8) but becomes annoyed; he is repeatedly "disarmed" and "unmanned" (16) by him but also "in a wonderful manner touched and disconcerted" (10); he is full of pity but also repulsion; he is "thunderstruck" (25) by Bartleby but recognizes his "wondrous ascendancy" (25) over him.

After discovering that Bartleby lives in his office, he feels "stinging" and "fraternal" melancholy—we are both "sons of Adam," he realizes (17)—but he instantly rejects it as "sad fancyings." Indeed, in several places, he describes his responses, using Biblical (e.g., "a pillar of salt," 10), generally religious (e.g., 16), and specifically Christian references (e.g., 26).

But despite his mixed responses and his appeals to religion, he tries (several times) to dismiss Bartleby, assuming after each such decision that Bartleby will heed his word. When Bartleby continues to stand fast, the lawyer instead moves his own offices. When questioned about Bartleby by the lawyer who took up occupancy in his former office, the lawyer, like Peter with respect to Jesus, three times denies any relation to or knowledge of him. Yet he will voluntarily converse with Bartleby two more times, trying again on both occasions to help him by offering, among other things, to take him to his own home and later, after Bartleby is removed to the Tombs, by making sure that he is well fed.

1. How does the lawyer see Bartleby? Does he see him as anything more than "Bartleby, the Scrivener"?
2. What do you think of the lawyer's treatment of Bartleby? Is it commendable? Deplorable? Understandable? Or something else? Is there anything else the lawyer should have done? How would you act if you were in the lawyer's place?
3. Does he, on balance, "do well by" Bartleby—or not?
4. What is the source of Bartleby's "wondrous ascendancy" over the lawyer? (25) Or, more plainly, why does the lawyer put up with him? Should he have?
5. Do you think the lawyer learns anything from Bartleby? If not, why not? If yes, when and what does he learn? (In this regard, think particularly about what he might mean when he says, "For a few moments I was turned into a pillar of salt" [cf. Genesis 19:26], as well as his many other religious references, including his pronouncement, when he finds Bartleby dead: He lies "with kings and counsellors" [cf. Job 3:11-15]). If you don't think the lawyer learns anything from Bartleby, what *should* he have learned? What have you learned?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: When I first read the story and Bartleby refuses to proofread the copies that he himself has written, that was it, he was out of there. For the lawyer, "the conditions of our relationship are employment. I'm not your social worker or your father confessor or your friend. You've come here to do a job. We have, by everybody's mutual understanding, a relationship of utility. That's all there is here. When we cease to be useful the one to the other, that's it." And I think the story is meant to be an education of people like me.

Amy Kass: So what you are suggesting is that what the lawyer could do for Bartleby is to somehow treat him on a human level. He could give him some hope, he could give him some encouragement.

Leon Kass: And he could give him some human company.

Diana Schaub: But remember that Bartleby stands in dead-wall reveries hour

after hour. And so if what you are calling for is to join him, well, you cannot engage him in conversation because he rejects conversation, so you are just going to stand with him and look at the wall. Now, it is possible that Bartleby might recognize that as some kind of reaching out to him and respond to it, and so maybe it is worth an effort. But I think you are underestimating the threat that Bartleby poses.

Leon Kass: Right, there is one moment where Bartleby has preferred not to do something, and the lawyer tries again: "And what is the reason for that?" Bartleby says, "You can see for yourself the reason." And the lawyer looks at him and says, "Oh! Your eyesight! Your eyesight is gone bad because you've been scribbling here in the dark." The lawyer has, in a way, medicalized him. Bartleby is in effect saying, "Don't you see . . . ?" —and then, of course we can all fill in what you think would be seen if you saw Bartleby as the broken, dispirited, hopeless human being that he is. But the lawyer is looking for some kind of problem that he can fix.

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D. Coda

Early in 1853, Melville was asked by *Putnam's Magazine*, the nation's then-leading literary monthly, to contribute a work of short fiction. Apparently, he began by writing a story about a young wife who waits seventeen years for news from her husband, who left home to find work. As Melville conceived the story, the mailbox was a reminder of the passage of time: unused, it rots and falls apart. Word never comes. For unknown reasons, this story was abandoned, but the forlorn mailbox and the absent mail seem to have found themselves into the Dead Letter Office, which is mentioned in the coda to "Bartleby, the Scrivener," the story that was in fact published at the end of the same year. In the coda, the mention of the Dead Letter Office is intended to give us some idea about the life of Bartleby prior to the events narrated in the story. But the lawyer/narrator specifically warns us that the information he divulges is an "item of rumor": "hence, how true it is I cannot now tell." He includes it, he tells us, because of its "suggestive interest" to him and possibly to us, his readers, as well.

1. Does the coda help you to better understand Bartleby? If so, in what way(s)?
2. What would it have been like to work in the Dead Letter Office? What effect do you think it had on Bartleby, and why? How do you think his work in the Dead Letter Office may have changed the way he viewed his work as a scrivener?
3. Does the coda help you to better understand the lawyer? If so, does it change your assessment of the lawyer? For better or for worse? What is the lawyer's own relationship with letters? With human communication in general?
4. What is the meaning of the lawyer's final exclamation, "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" (37)?

IN CONVERSATION

Diana Schaub: We should remind ourselves of what a scrivener is. A scrivener, or a scribe, is a public copyist, an official writer, but it is a role that had a much higher status in the past. If you go back to Ancient Israel or all the way up through New Testament times, the scribes were those who studied Scripture, and they served as copyists, editors, teachers, and jurists. The letters they dealt with were *living* letters: they were the living letters of the word of God.

But Bartleby now lives in a world where letters serve a very different and a much attenuated function, and in which scribes and scriveners have a much reduced function. So at the end of the story, the lawyer passes along this rumor that he had heard about Bartleby having maybe worked in the Dead Letter Office. The lawyer, who very much believes in the efficacy of letters, speculates that this experience of letters gone awry would have perhaps contributed to Bartleby's affliction: "On errands of life, these letters speed to death." But it seems that what the lawyer does not understand is that, for Bartleby, the letters he deals with in the law office are just as much dead letters as those that he dealt with in the Dead Letter Office of the Post Office. And it is that dawning realization of Bartleby's that is the origin of his progressive refusals, and there is a progress in those refusals, of those withdrawals from life.

Bartleby has really given up on the word; he's given up on communication, and that is why he lapses into silence and speaks only to refuse engagement and stares

at these blank walls instead. And that is why Bartleby has to reject this entire world of letters. It is why he doesn't read, why he won't write, why he won't have anything to do with the Post Office.

In contrast, the lawyer is absolutely wedded to the world of letters. When he tries to get rid of Bartleby he says, "Why don't you go off and then write me a letter if there is anything that you need from me and I will come to your aid." Or he says, "If I could only find out whether he has family, and then I could write a letter to them." He really believes in the efficacy of letters, which is to say of reason, even though his understanding of reason is a very narrow one.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

IV. Thinking with the Text

This story, like the others in *What So Proudly We Hail*, is, of course, interesting in itself. But, again like the others, it can also be read as a mirror in which we can see ourselves as human beings and as American citizens, and through which we can become more thoughtful about what our national and civic identity might mean and require. This story invites reflection, especially about our personal and civic attitudes toward our neighbors, about the need for the virtue of compassion and what it entails, and about the symbolic and literal meaning of "erecting walls" between ourselves and our neighbors. It also invites us to think about some of the implications of our American principles and ways.

A. Doing for Others

As the story unfolds, the lawyer refers to Bartleby in multiple ways: as his employee, as a friend, and as an "incurably forlorn" fellow human being—one of the "sons of Adam" (17). But until the very end, despite the multiple possible relationships that these references imply, the lawyer constantly tries to *do* something *for* Bartleby. Indeed, one is tempted to see all of his exchanges with Bartleby, as well as all his efforts to "help him," as an endless succession of dead letters, an endless and futile effort to find remedies.

1. How are people like Bartleby best understood? As human beings with problems to be solved? As fellow sufferers in need of companionship? In some other way?
2. Does the following generalization about how we human beings behave with respect to the suffering of others tell us more about the lawyer/narrator or more about all human beings, ourselves included?

> *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 rid of it. (18)*

3. Were you to meet a Bartleby, how would you behave? Would you try to "do something" for him? If so, what? Or would you try instead to "be there" with him? If so, how? Is there yet another way to deal with the sort of deep human difficulties that a man like Bartleby presents?
4. What are the implications of your response to the previous question for our civic life? What do fellow citizens owe to one another?

B. "A Story of Wall-Street": Communicating with Others

There are varying accounts of how Wall Street derived its name, but a generally accepted version traces it to an earthen wall on the northern boundary of the seventeenth-century New Amsterdam settlement, erected, it is thought, to protect against encroachment by New England colonists or incursions by Native Americans. Though the original wall has long since disappeared, the story's subtitle, "A Story of Wall-Street," points us to another general theme that Melville invites us to consider: the symbolic and general meaning and consequences of erecting walls.

1. Do walls or "fences," as Robert Frost's famous poem "Mending Wall" states, "make good neighbors"?
2. Is the problem-solving mentality a way, whether intended or not, of placing walls between us and the realities of suffering and pain?
3. Can walls enhance, as well as diminish, communication between people? Think

of the walls within the office—both the one which Bartleby stares at and the "walls" that the lawyer has erected to separate himself from Bartleby: the "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" (7–8).

4. Are walls—and the privacy they promote—conducive to productivity?
5. What kind of speech has the best chance of overcoming the barriers between people? Can speech be effective if people do not share the same assumptions about the world? (The lawyer, you may recall, says that he has "assumptions" [about the reasonableness of people and the world], but Bartleby has "preferences.")

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: The office is basically a walled-in room with a partition of folding doors in between offices. It has windows on one side that point to a white wall, and on the other side the windows point to a red wall that has turned black. It's located on the second floor and is surrounded by huge structures so that one imagines that it is quite dim, and probably dingy, and there is no carpeting on the floor. The whole picture is rather bleak.

Diana Schaub: Melville understood what cubicle culture was like long before cubicles were actually built. There are these double doors that go between the outer office where the other scribes are and the lawyer himself is. But then when Bartleby comes on, the lawyer puts Bartleby in his own room, but sets up another little partition so that he does not have to see Bartleby but he can always be within range of the lawyer's voice, so it really does become a true cubicle.

Leon Kass: So the lawyer has put Bartleby in a place where he will not have to look at him. The lawyer talks about how he has society and privacy together. But the view of this society is, "I am present with my tools. Yes, they have their human qualities, but I can ignore them providing they do their work."

Wilfred McClay: Is there a connection between this highly specialized, dehumanized labor that Bartleby is engaged in and the dehumanized environment,

where he is seen merely as a scrivener and not as a forlorn human being? Is there some connection between that and, if not capitalism, at least modernity and the division of labor?

Leon Kass: Melville shows us a world in which the emphasis on a kind of rationalization produces a world in which everybody is alone. It is not just Bartleby who has no family. The lawyer, we assume, has nobody at home. Nippers and Turkey have nobody at home. Ginger Nut has a father. This is a world of isolated human beings. The question he is raising for us, in a way, is this: is the greatness of American finance and industry, capitalism, bought at a cost of an erosion of the fundamental relations of human beings, one to the other? You do not have to be a Marxist to raise this question about the alienation of human beings under conditions of modern life, and it might be the very backside of what is wonderful about it.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

C. Questions about America

Wall Street is historically, economically, and symbolically a central American place and institution. Stones from the original wall of Wall Street were later used in building the first City Hall. After the American Revolution, the first Congress assembled there in 1789; there George Washington was sworn in as the first president of the United States. Originally inhabited by private residences, Wall Street was by Melville's time home to many law firms and well on its way to becoming *the* hub of financial markets that it is today. Thus, although the story of Bartleby may be read as a universal human tale, the setting itself, as well as the people who work there, invites us to think specifically about America and about the issues the story raises for us as American citizens.

1. *Individualism*. Might either the lawyer or Bartleby—or both—represent the downside of the American individualism we so proudly hail? Does the depiction of either of these characters, both of whom live isolated lives detached from forebears and families, suggest something more general about the sufficiency of the American emphasis on freedom, individual rights, and independence? How would the story be different if Bartleby or the lawyer had

families with whom they lived?

2. *Enterprise and Commerce*. What does the story have to say about the human significance of the world of business? What happens to a people who focus mainly on economic matters? According to one interpretation of the story, "Wall Street is a place where the soul comes to die." To what extent might that be true?
3. *Religion*. Do the many religious references in the story, especially to Christianity, convey any suggestions about the importance of religion in America? What about his comparison of Wall Street on Sunday to "Petra" (16), the ancient biblical city known for its tombs made from pink rock? Is Melville suggesting—and if so, would you agree—that religion is needed to make America's utilitarian and materialistic spirit more humane? Is it strong enough to do so?
4. *Law and Justice*. Does Melville's treatment of the lawyer(s) imply a criticism of law in America? Does Melville's reference to the "Halls of Justice" as the "Tombs" and his brief treatment of the jail imply a criticism of justice in America?
5. *Reason and Practical Rationality*. What can we learn from the story about the strengths and weaknesses of America's love of rationality, practicality, and useful activities?
6. Is Melville's story a cautionary tale? If so, about what is he cautioning us? Commerce? Lawyerly prudence, accommodation, and balance? The utilitarian and problem-solving attitude many Americans adopt toward life and toward other human beings? Something else?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: We did nothing with the Christianity in this story, which is very prominent and very important. But it is a false Christianity that the lawyer has, and what Melville might be pointing to is that you need some kind of religion to nurture this other, more spiritual, aspect of human beings.

Wilfred McClay: On that Sunday that the lawyer comes to his office, and he was going to Trinity Church, the famous church on Wall Street, and he gets there a little early and goes by his chambers. He discovers that Bartleby is there, and he

is so disturbed by that that he says that he could not continue on to church. Could he not go to church because he felt unworthy to be there? I don't think so. I think it's because of the feeling of what he would get there is somehow incommensurate with the reality of what he has seen, of the desperation and the dark insight into the human prospect: "Ah, humanity!"

Amy Kass: But it also has to do with the fact that the lawyer has no understanding of what church is for. He's going to church to hear some sermon by a famous man. That is what leads him there. We have no reason to believe that he is a regular churchgoer. So he is not fit to go there because he suddenly has a window into the human soul.

Leon Kass: Americans, as a practical-minded people focused on the here and now and the bottom line, tend only on Sundays to think about the ultimate matters, about the first things, about the last things, about the soul and its fate. We are in danger of being forgetful about those ultimate things. Melville was always interested in those things. *Moby-Dick* is about nothing so much as those sorts of ultimate questions. And here is a story which is significant by the absence of these things, except in the presence of Bartleby who, naked and alone, is confronting that large and mysterious thing and may be embracing it out of sickness and despair.

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