

“Ah humanity!”: Bartleby’s Challenge to the Lawyer

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Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” presents one of the more fascinating rebellions in American literature—fascinating because of its decidedly ambiguous nature. The Lawyer, the narrator of Melville’s tale, wishes to hire a new scrivener in order to increase the productivity of his Wall Street law firm. When Bartleby is originally hired for this purpose, he produces more work than the Lawyer had previously thought possible. One of the scrivener’s duties, however, is to check his copies against the original document with the aid of another as reader. Asked to perform this menial, yet essential task, Bartleby refuses with words that have since become a widely recognized mantra, of sorts: “I prefer not to.” Perplexed, the Lawyer is at first willing to excuse Bartleby’s noncompliance – until Bartleby shirks all of his responsibilities at once, “preferring” instead to stare at a wall. Bartleby’s “passive resistance,” as it has been deemed by a number of past and contemporary critics, escalates throughout the story, resulting at last in his imprisonment and self-inflicted starvation. Bartleby’s “I prefer not to” is often repeated but never explained, to the great frustration and bewilderment of the Lawyer and, most likely, to the reader.

Though the subject of voluminous debate among contemporary critics, the relationship between Melville’s Bartleby and the story’s narrating lawyer remains, as ever, the subject of much conjecture. The predominantly accepted interpretation is that the Lawyer’s outreach to Bartleby is one of genuine and sincere pity. This view accepts the Lawyer’s self-appraisal at face-value. His claim towards selflessness and sensitivity is recognized as inherently accurate. Very infrequently has the argument been made that the Lawyer’s self-appraisal might be more than a little biased and that his claims of selflessness actually depict him as selfish. Dan

McCall, author of *The Silence of Bartleby*, goes so far as to deem any reading which expresses this view as “perverse” on the grounds that “The Lawyer’s diction and cadences will not support it” (56). That this interpretation of the Lawyer’s speech patterns be grounds for denouncing the latter possibility is, quite frankly, absurd. McCall’s objection supposes that because the Lawyer claims he is selfless, and nothing in his claims states otherwise, the reader is to assess his character as he wishes to be assessed—but is there not such a thing as selfish charity? Do not certain men give for the sake of being perceived as giving? In challenging this popularly held interpretation, the reader must look to the nature of Bartleby’s challenge to the lawyer. Two possibilities present themselves: either Bartleby’s challenge is a conscientious rebellion, or his challenge is involuntary--the outcome of a “melancholic lunacy”? Investigating this dynamic may better illuminate the reason for the Lawyer’s intervention, which should, in turn, serve to elucidate more about Melville’s intent and purpose in the drafting of Bartleby’s dissent.

The challenge of Bartleby’s famous “I would prefer not to” is complex. Arsić states, in his recent *Passive Constitutions or 7 ½ Times Bartleby*, that the narrator “has to untangle this perplexity...because Bartleby is a threat not only to his property or business but also, as it turns out, to his ‘head,’ to the way he thinks and acts” (12). The former threat challenges the Lawyer on a pragmatic and personal level, contesting his authority at his firm. This observation, if nothing else, is more than grounds for Bartleby’s dismissal from the office. The fact, however, that the Lawyer does not dismiss him, but instead chooses to entertain Bartleby’s eccentricities as “involuntary,” is worthy of discussion. The Lawyer presents his reasons for dealing with Bartleby’s resistance:

He is useful to me. I can get along with him. If I turn him away, the chances are he will fall 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 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. (50-51)

This passage alone dismantles all criticism that deems the Lawyer as a worthy humanist or even, as one critic deems him, “Christ-like in his charity.” One wonders, indeed, if those who support this view perhaps skipped entirely over these words in reading Melville’s story. The Lawyer’s motives in entertaining Bartleby’s eccentricities originate, with no exception (by his own confession), in selfishness. Even his concern over the prospect of Bartleby starving—of falling to “some less indulgent employer”—is a selfish one, the reason for his remorse being the guilt that he knows he will later feel upon that circumstance taking place. The Lawyer, as he willingly admits, is acting “charitably” (or so he deems it) for the reward of a clean conscience.

If one is to regard the Lawyer as the charitable and generous man whom he would have the reader take him for, what remains for him to tell this story? The story, Thomas Dilworth accurately explains, is brought up as the Lawyer’s way of “conducting his own defense, and, as with any defense, it is a response to an accusation of guilt” (49). If his actions reflected, as Dilworth would have one believe, an “overall benignity towards Bartleby” (50), this guilt remains unexplainable. The Lawyer must be guilty of some moral transgression that fails, in the end, to “save” Bartleby. Indeed, it earns instead Bartleby’s rejection and scorn, but just what more, as Dilworth phrases the question, “can the lawyer do or offer to do”? (50) Dilworth defends the Lawyer for having done everything he can. His guilt, he supposes “may not be blameworthy,” supposing Bartleby’s unique predicament to be “unsolvable” (51). Whether or not the Lawyer is able to think of a way to assist Bartleby is, by this point, wholly irrelevant. His dealings with Bartleby have overtly expressed all that the reader needs to know in order to engender a moral condemnation of his character. The Lawyer’s “altruistic” actions

are inseparable from self-interest. The only reason he decides to help Bartleby is out of the possibility that he will gain—either in the form of material benefit (i.e. the immense amount of work Bartleby is capable of performing, at first, quickly and without rest), or more often, in the form of an internalized reward: the Lawyer can assuage his strong feelings of guilt and preserve an ideal self-image. If he is not trying to fool the reader, to whom he makes his defense, he is certainly, at the least, trying to fool himself concerning his own merits.

Though literary criticism on the story very recently has moved in the direction of accepting this evaluation of the Lawyer's character, some critics maintain that this interpretation accounts for his character only in the early sections of the text and that his "change" by time of his final confrontation with Bartleby is what should be evaluated.

Winifred Morgan addresses this issue in her essay, "Bartleby and the Failure of Conventional Virtue":

How the reader interprets the narrator's final wail "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" depends on whether the narrator has merely gone through a series of conventional but ineffectual holding actions against the mystery of suffering in the world or whether he has actually encountered it and that encounter has altered his perceptions and will influence his later choices. (258)

Morgan identifies a pivotal issue here. Nevertheless, by the end of the narrative, the Lawyer goes to see Bartleby only out of a combined sense of guilt and self-interest that was his motivation all along. He has come to no better understanding of Bartleby's predicament. Most importantly, however, Bartleby pronounces his judgment upon him—now with more enmity than ever before. "I know you," Bartleby states, "and I want nothing to say to you" (Melville 71). The Lawyer's final cry, then, carries with it a tone of helplessness and surrender: he acknowledges his inability to "cure" Bartleby—or any other being for that matter—but prides himself (throughout the entirety of the story) on the fact that he tries. The reader more than

likely is meant to come away from Melville's piece in condemnation of the Lawyer. Like the Lawyer, however, we are doomed to wonder at Bartleby's character—the nature of his resolute will towards remaining “stationary.” The reader comes only marginally closer to a complete understanding of Melville's intent in creating this story. The best that can be achieved, without the authoritative voice of Melville himself to guide us, is to provide possibilities of interpretation based on the relationship between Bartleby and the Lawyer.

The nature of Bartleby's refutation, as enigmatic and as “lunatic” as it would appear to be, is often approached in the same manner. Historicist critics are inclined, even now, towards the explanation that Melville is Bartleby himself. Bartleby's refusal to perform menial tasks and, later, to copy at all, is quite often compared to Melville's frustration with his writing. Aggravated with the expectations of the surrounding capitalist society, which craved only a “pointless action story,” Melville descended “finally to silence rather than write” (Morgan 261). This interpretation, at first glance, would explain a lot. The Lawyer in this interpretation would represent capitalist society—not a stretch of a symbol by any means. The objection of Bartleby is neatly explained as Melville's refusal to emulate his contemporary literary trends. The problem with this theory is that it wraps up the story a bit too neatly, and in so doing, reduces Melville's masterful fable into a tale of personal angst. Perhaps most ignored in this interpretation is the Lawyer's final plea, “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!” which equates Bartleby and humanity as one and the same. If Bartleby is humanity, then the reader must be looking at a meaning deeper and more universal than that of a single writer's literary rebellion.

A rebellion it most certainly is, though. Egbert Oliver, in his “A Second Look at ‘Bartleby,’” makes the error of assessing Bartleby as having “withdrawn within himself, cutting off, one by one, the bonds of human fellowship and association until he stood “alone,

completely blank and silent” (63). This flawed estimation of Bartleby’s character is, as critic Todd Giles notes, a fairly common one:

Many critics who focus on the characterization of Bartleby attribute his supposed state of forlorn hopelessness to the adverse effects of consumeristic Wall Street America on the working classes. Why, rather than a product or victim, do we not understand Bartleby as potentiality...someone whose actions we ourselves should strive for?...[H]e is unrepentantly affirmative and life-embracing in his radical passivity. (88)

The mistake Giles cites is, in addition, the very same error made by the Lawyer in trying to assist Bartleby. Bartleby cannot be helped because he does not seek help. He is not “passive” in the sense that the word has been commonly employed in describing him (certainly he does not withdraw out of “aloofness” or “melancholy”), nor is he “active” in the sense of one with the desire to affect change. His “radical passivity,” conversely, is used to dismiss change--to remain, despite societal forces, a rigidly fixed and immovable force in Melville’s imagined society.

Historicist critics have time and time again erred by way of introducing Bartleby as any one being. Indeed, as McCall points out, “critics ‘prove’ that Bartleby is Melville himself, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson...and even Christ” (14). If, though, Bartleby is humanity—and his radical passivity is aimed at resisting change—the only thing left to determine is the question of what he is resisting by way of his many “preferences.” What has remained nearly entirely consistent (and indeed is quite difficult to dismiss) is Bartleby’s rejection of capitalist values. The subtitle of Bartleby, “A Story of Wall-street,” has, unsurprisingly, attracted no little amount of Marxist consideration. As often as the Lawyer’s particular practice is called to attention by scholars, very rarely is his firm thought of as anything other than what it is claimed to be: “a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages, and title-deeds.” By the Lawyer’s own account, his business is run by “one of

those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause” (40). This fact, for the majority of interpreters, aligns the Lawyer’s practice, as it rightfully should, with strictly consumerist purposes. Is it possible, then, that what Bartleby rejects are these very consumerist principles?

There is plenty of evidence to support this possibility. The Lawyer, as James C. Wilson notes, “considers his employees useful insofar as he can exploit them and make money from their labor” (335), an estimation based upon the Lawyer’s assessment of his workers in terms of their “utility.” “He is a very useful man to me” is a phrase uttered both of Nippers and Turkey, and later (with only a slight manipulation of phrasing) of Bartleby, all despite their individual eccentricities, which the Lawyer is capable of ignoring in exchange for the profit he is sure to have as a result of their industriousness.

Much also has been made of the setting. Apart from its being on the center of Wall Street--the heart, so to speak, of American capitalism--the views beyond nearly every window are obstructed by other buildings. The Lawyer is separated from his workers by glass folding-doors, creating distance, as Wilson states, which reflects the “division of this particular society into two distinct classes: the property owners and the propertyless workers” (336).

The possibility of a Marxist reading of Bartleby brings us back to inspecting the relationship between the Lawyer and Bartleby. The Lawyer does not understand Bartleby’s rebellion for a number of reasons. First and foremost, he is unfamiliar with it; not having met such dissent before. Bartleby’s words are portrayed as so foreign to him that at first the Lawyer believes his ears have deceived him or that Bartleby has misunderstood him. When Bartleby’s famous utterance is repeated, the Lawyer has thoughts of removing Bartleby from the premises, dismissing them only because of Bartleby’s lack of “uneasiness, anger,

impatience, or impertinence” (47). This statement has been read, by Wilson and others, as indicative of the bourgeois values of unquestioning loyalty demonstrated by the proletariat individual toward his superiors, as well as an overarching suppression of passion by members of that class. This fact, though, seems to say more about the nature of Bartleby’s rebellion than about the Lawyer. Bartleby, because he does not display “uneasiness, anger, impatience, or impertinence,” is an effective dissenter. It is not difficult to see, given statements such as this one, how so many critics perceive Thoreau, Emerson, or Gandhi in the characterization of Bartleby. Bartleby’s dissent at this point in the text seems obvious. The confusion of many critics, then, comes from the descent into “lunacy” that follows: Bartleby’s locking himself in the office, living there, refusing to move from the premises when it is no longer even inhabited, and--at last--his death by starvation. If the reader remains confused by this lunacy, perhaps he/she is supposed to be. Melville, as he depicts Bartleby’s descent into madness, could very well be issuing a warning. Bartleby’s enigmatic end potentially could represent the absurd end of civil disobedience: the removal of passion to affect change leads, eventually, to the Lawyer’s (and the reader’s) inability to even discern Bartleby’s central argument. We are given no explicitly stated reason for his refusal and so dismiss him, as the Lawyer also does, as “a little deranged” (72). Bartleby’s main fault in his opposition is his lack of clarity in so performing it and, even more critically, his lack of passion.

It is not surprising, then, that the Lawyer fails to recognize his dissent as anything but a senseless eccentricity. Dismissing Bartleby’s rebellion with only minimal effort, the Lawyer allows him to sit idly, even after his open refusal to do any work at all. Bartleby is reduced, in the Lawyer’s words, to a mere physical encumbrance with the same worth as an unsightly piece of furniture: “He remained as ever, a fixture in my chamber” (60). We gain from the

Lawyer's words that were it not for the suffering of his professional reputation, this practice would have gone on indefinitely. The Lawyer fears only that Bartleby is "denying authority; perplexing visitors; and scandalizing...[his] professional reputation" (65). Bartleby is reduced to a material burden, a hindrance to the Lawyer's economic gain.

The Lawyer is unable to solve the problem that Bartleby presents because his only solution is to throw money at him. In first trying to dismiss Bartleby, the Lawyer attempts a bribe: "'Bartleby,'" said I, 'I owe you twelve dollars on account; here are thirty two; the odd twenty are yours. – Will you take it?' and I handed the bills towards him" (60). Towards the end of Melville's piece, he also bribes the prison's "Grub-man" to make sure that Bartleby eats well. One wonders if the Lawyer even expects this gesture to help Bartleby. Certainly, he performs these actions with the goal of charity in mind (at least, the Lawyer's idea of charity), though the more discernible aim in his plan is to clear his individual conscience of Bartleby's judgment.

If the reader ascribes any accuracy to McCall's claim that the Lawyer's "diction and cadences" do not support a morally condemning summation of the Lawyer, and that such a reading would be "perverse," the meaning of the narrative becomes entirely lost. The meaning of Bartleby's dissent, even with as little sense as it seems to contain, becomes, rather than any form of political, economic, or moral rebellion, a lunatic's cry for desired passivity. Such a reading misses entirely Melville's criticism of the consumerist, bourgeois suppression of individuality and justice that has long been rejected on the grounds that the Lawyer, in his "Christ-like" charity, tries to remedy Bartleby's problem. The text does not support this supposition. The Lawyer, in his own language, admits with little shame that his intent of assisting Bartleby is the result of his desire to form a "sweet morsel for his conscience" and to

deal with whatever guilt he feels at the beginning of the narrative. As it will “cost little or nothing” to befriend Bartleby, the Lawyer freely does so, without ever having discerned the nature of Bartleby’s rebellion.

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