

“BARTLEBY, THE SCRIVENER”:
A SIMPLE READING

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IT IS *a fact* not generally acknowledged that “Bartleby, the Scrivener” is a story with only one character—the lawyer who tells it.¹ 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 Profesor, 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 pro pieties 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. Worldly 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 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. They are really a rather well-bred 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.

Endnotes

1 . Kingsley Widmer is, I think, the only real exception. His statement of his perception has varied slightly with every version of his much-rewritten article/chapter on “Bartleby.” Its most recent form is a slightly toned-down version of the earlier ones:

“Bartleby only contains one reasonably full character, the unnamed narrating attorney.” *The Ways of Nihilism: A Study of Herman Melville’s Short Novels* (The California State Colleges, 1970), pp. 91-125.

In no version, however, does Widmer try to demonstrate the truth of this assertion, as I try to do here in some detail. Nor does he seem to see the minor characters as aspects of the lawyer’s mind. Moreover, he appears at times to write as if the scrivener were a separate character, in spite of his statement that

Bartleby is not “a person or character in the usual senses.” *The Literary Rebel* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), pp. 49-59. His chief concern is to demonstrate the hopelessness of the lawyer’s liberal rationalism, and the consequent “nihilism” of Bartleby’s refusal to accept it.