



Message

Good Morning. Homecomings are often distinctive experiences, either for good or ill. Today, almost ten years away from the Emerson sermon pulpit, is one for me, accompanied by feelings of gratitude and appreciation to be invited.

Recently, I've been reading on the subject of human happiness, and encountered this memorable secret from none other than the legendary George Burns:

Happiness? A good cigar, a good meal; a good cigar and a good woman . . . or a bad woman. It depends on how much happiness you can handle.

This counsel, remember, from the same source who was once chided for his fondness of dating young starlets. "People are always asking me why I don't date women my own age. But that's the whole problem. There *are* no women my age"

Right there is an illustration of what makes this personal homecoming so wonderful. When you've been gone this long, an audience has either forgotten all your old jokes and stories or has never heard them. On these terms, returning means your listeners are fresh meat

So much for reminiscing. Being with you today is not only an honor and special pleasure, it's also one linked to the calendar. Entering November, nearing the last Sundays before Advent, we are on the threshold of a magical time of the year, when we more easily acknowledge a spirit of giving and caring for those around us, when the common bonds of trust, charity, and affection seem more likely to transcend divergent faiths, race, age, genders, or nationality.

As Herman Melville's short story, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (to give its full and proper title) seems to prompt global ruminations like these, let me detail some of its specifics so we have common points of reference as I go along. And of course, with malice aforethought, I'm hoping what I have to say is of sufficient interest to make you wish to track the story down if you've not already read it, or to read it again, if you have.

Melville wrote fifteen short stories, of which this is the first, but by its publication in 1853, he was already an experienced writer who had produced seven novels, including arguably the most important ever written by an American, *Moby-Dick*. The story has puzzled and provoked readers since it first appeared, to the point that Bartleby as a character is now a piece of our collective cultural consciousness.

The work is widely anthologized, and those of us who know it marvel at the ways it probes and uncovers powerful ethical issues through the person of a character who has only 37 lines in a story 16,000 words long, almost all of them, "I prefer not to" or a variation on it. The next time you see a politician on the 10 o'clock news preferring not to answer a certain question or discuss a particular topic, you may find it hard not to remember Bartleby.

There is a wonderful range of explanations for how all this happens. Begin with the subtitle, or the story's full title: "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street." At the level of a pun, we know the office in which almost all of the story's action takes place is so blocked from natural light that it's effectively "walled in" by Wall Street. (Henry David Thoreau makes the same pun in Section IX of *Walden*, suggesting his pond is "walled in" by the surrounding rocks.) The elderly lawyer who narrates the story says the view is deficient in what landscape painters call "life."

So here is the first clue to the importance of what's taking place: the making of money, and the sort of impersonal machinery needed to do so, has had a marked effect – little of it good – on the quality of interpersonal relations the story permits us to see. I've never read a Marxist critique of "Bartleby," but I have no trouble imagining one.

The story is told as a long since completed flashback, narrated by an elderly lawyer who while never telling us his name, supplies this revealing self description: "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 All who know me consider me an eminently *safe* man."

One day Bartleby appears, motionless, at his office doorway. It's one of the great entrances in all of literature. "I can see that figure now," the lawyer says, "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby." Intrigued, he hires Bartleby as a scrivener, as a human copy machine, and at first he gorges on great quantities of work. Soon, though, Bartleby's eccentricities are revealed. He refuses to proofread his own or anyone else's work. Perhaps "refuses" is too strong a word, as what he says is, "I prefer not to." The lawyer is bewildered, as proofreading is obviously a required part of any copyist's work. In days, bewilderment gives way to disappointment, irritation, then anger.

Suddenly, though, the lawyer realizes Bartleby never seems to go for lunch or dinner; in fact, he never seems to go *anywhere*, but relies on the young office boy to bring him handfuls of ginger nut cakes. The lawyer decides Bartleby intends no insolence or mischief, that his eccentricity must be involuntary, and that he can live with it. Bartleby is otherwise a good worker, and besides, he concludes, by tolerating his behavior, "I can cheaply purchase a delicious self approval . . . lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience."

But this self serving routine cannot be sustained, unraveling on a Sunday morning. Deciding to attend services at Trinity Church, he first stops at his nearby office, and is startled to discover the door is barricaded from within. Bartleby opens it slightly, appearing in his shirtsleeves, then asks his employer to come back later. Astonished, the lawyer agrees. When he returns, finding himself alone, he discovers that Bartleby has actually been living in the office. Sadly concluding that Bartleby is the victim of "innate and incurable disorder," he decides to go home rather than to church. "Somehow," he says, "the things I had seen disqualified me for the time from churchgoing."

Events now begin to accelerate. The next day, Bartleby does no copying, just stares out the window at the nearby brick wall. Asked why, he says he will do no more writing. Asked again, he replies, "Do you not see the reason for yourself?"

Bewildered, the lawyer decides the explanation is eyestrain. He gives Bartleby notice and almost triple the salary due him, but on the announced separation day, Bartleby does not leave. He doesn't do anything. At first, the lawyer responds with rage, then with some time to consider alternatives, anger turns to charity. He says he recalls the Biblical injunction, "A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another." And he decides Bartleby may stay, just staring at the dead wall beyond the window.

Days pass, and uncharitable remarks begin to be heard from professional colleagues and clients. Alarmed at the potential loss of reputation and business, the lawyer decides that if Bartleby will not leave, the lawyer will move to another office. He does, and one day the replacement tenant appears, to complain that Bartleby is still there, and as his former employer, demands that he do something. The lawyer's reply is memorable. "I am very sorry, sir," he says, "but really the man you allude to is nothing to me that you should hold me responsible for him."

The lawyer nonetheless returns to his former office to plead with Bartleby to leave, even suggesting Bartleby come home with him; Bartleby declines. The lawyer leaves, Bartleby is subsequently arrested as a vagrant, and led through the noon streets with a gathering crowd to "The Tombs," the New York City jail, where, several days later, the lawyer visits. He pays the jailer to supply Bartleby with special food – significantly enough, in silver coin – but when he looks for his former copyist in the prison yard, he finds him dead, huddled at the base of the surrounding stone wall, in the fetal position.

The story ends with a two paragraph epilogue. Several months after Bartleby's death, the lawyer hears the rumor he is never afterward able to confirm or deny, but shares with us nonetheless: it's that Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Federal Dead Letter Office in Washington, a job from which – in this time before Civil Service protection – he'd suddenly been removed by a change in administration. How grimly suited a job was this for Bartleby, muses the lawyer, work which perhaps even helped cause his melancholy end. The story's last two sentences are, "On errands of life, these letters speed to death. Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!"

Well, now that we know that, what do we know? A conventional view of the story is to point out how it reveals the discrepancy between our consciences and our actions. Melville supplies no small amount of tension, strain, interplay between these forces, fuel for what makes fiction work. There is no difficulty, for example, in seeing here a critique on the condition of contemporary Christianity, of the declining strength of traditional Judeo-Christian values, and the quality of how we regard those around us.

The story insures there's no shortage of Christ figure imagery surrounding Bartleby. But if Bartleby is Christ-like, in this Gospel the Savior dies and nothing is gained as a result. There's no resurrection, no offered or gained salvation. Bartleby, unlike Christ, seems to have little or nothing to offer in return for allegiance, devotion, support, or love. Given those facts, we should not be surprised that the story has often been added to Seminary reading lists for the training of clergy.

Another tempting assumption is to use the biographical fallacy, that Bartleby is a self portrait of Melville, wanting to think and write great thoughts, but viewed and accepted by his readers only as the exotic author of best selling South Seas romances. A variation would be to suggest Bartleby is the prototypical American artist, preferring not to meet audience expectations in preference to charting his or her own path, finding his or her own creative voice, whatever financial sacrifices those decisions cause.

Some critics and readers have gone so far as to associate Bartleby with Henry David Thoreau, who so vigorously placed himself foursquare against the popular grain of 19th Century American materialistic culture. There is no small attraction to this view, especially the central lessons of *Walden* that not only are there no genuine blueprints for self improvement, but that as each of us is capable of being an artist, what we do with our lives may be our art forms.

Yet another perspective, characteristically from our Age of Anxiety, is to stress the isolation of the story's characters, the misperceptions, the failed attempts at communication, the inconsolable loneliness and despair which rises from the pages, climaxing with those last sentences: "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" This approach bonds the story to modern drama, to The Theatre of the Absurd, to the existential *angst* of Camus, Sartre, Beckett, Pinter, Genet.

Well, that's a \$6.98 survey/overview of the thousand dollar issue of what this story is about, and I will add my two cents' worth with at least one more way to read it before I close.

One of the central questions readers should address is, what use Melville makes of the story's flashback; in other words, setting us up to ask, reasonably enough, "What effect has the whole experience had on the lawyer/narrator?" Remember, the action of the story is long over when the narration begins. There is no pretense that early material will be contradicted by later actions; everything is relayed to us in retrospect, and we're justified in assuming the narrator's opening tone or attitude already reflects the results of his encounter with Bartleby.

As we read, we begin to sense the lawyer may have been on the verge of a significant personality change, one perhaps allowing him an insight and compassion for another person beyond anything of which he was previously capable. For example, his language changes:

"Bartleby, come here; I am not going to ask you to do anything you'd prefer not to do – I simply wish to speak to you."

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

But this acceptance by the lawyer of behavior he might not have earlier approved cannot come cheaply. There is a price to be paid for his new stance and benevolence: soured public opinion. And so dies, almost as soon as it was born, the lawyer's belief in Bartleby as key to a newly revealed opportunity for self improvement. The evidence seems clear he is unable to resolve the ambivalent emotions Bartleby unleashes within him. The only real decision he makes is to allow regard for social position, professional status, and business efficiency to determine the course of their relationship.

Much of the narrative, in other words, reveals the lawyer as unable to cope with paradox or forked emotion. If confronted with such feelings, he falls back on his mantra that the "easiest way of life is the

best.” To maintain contact with Bartleby leads to ridicule, professional ostracism, financial loss. Any corresponding material benefit is not seen.

The lawyer’s casual attitude about church going now may be seen in sharper perspective, especially his comment about feeling disqualified to attend after finding Bartleby making his home in their office. The conclusion seems clear that the lawyer wants a comfortable faith, divorced from concern with human misery or despair. That he feels at least somewhat guilty about his behavior may be guessed in his giving extra severance pay to Bartleby, then silver to the jail cook.

One apparent exception to the lawyer’s wish to avoid deeper involvement with Bartleby is his invitation to come home with him. Some readers view the gesture as a heroic act of generosity. It may be so, but the narrator appends it with the note that the offer is made until something “convenient” may be arranged. It may be, then, less an act of friendship or brotherhood than of procrastination, a conclusion consistent with what we see in the lawyer’s relations with others, especially the remaining employees in his office.

Finally, we’re led to the Epilogue, rumored word on Bartleby’s previous job as clerk in the Federal Dead Letter Office. The lawyer says Bartleby was “grimly suited” to handling such letters, sorting them for the flames. It’s an awful job, destroying letters which might have brought hope, solace, or salvation to those who die despairing or unsaved. The lawyer can sigh for Bartleby and humanity, neither of which gets its letter of reprieve, and the story ends.

But Melville again suggests the lawyer’s understanding may be seriously flawed. What of *his* letter? Could it too have gone undelivered?

We’ve seen Bartleby begin to change the lawyer; we see sparks of compassion as he seems poised to move from an “I-It” relationship to what Martin Buber terms “I-Thou” brotherhood. But the transition is aborted by regard for public pressure.

Could Bartleby and contact with him represent the lawyer’s letter of salvation? If so, his letter, sadly like many of ours, also winds up “dead,” deliverable but not received. The lawyer’s final statements, his potentially educational exposure to Bartleby, end as incomplete, for he shows little awareness of any special personal significance to their relationship.

In this sense, Bartleby is a test of one man’s capability for opening himself to reveal meaningful regard for another human being. Bartleby offers little in return but discomfort. The lawyer proves unable, finally, to change, and in this sense, the sometimes scrivener winds up a dead reprieve. The gears of the action mesh, the narrator’s behavior is resumed, only momentarily affected by contact with Bartleby, the walls of Wall Street remain intact, and a sense of stasis, routine, and equilibrium returns.

By use of flashback, the lawyer illustrates and confirms just how minor a place in his life the meeting with Bartleby was: a diversion, an odd time in an otherwise placid life on which he can look back with bemused detachment. He returns from the city jail, The Tombs, to his Wall Street office to maintain the life he would not disrupt for Bartleby.

And yet if that were all there is to the story, it's likely we wouldn't still be reading it, more than a century and a half after its appearance. “Bartleby” carries a broader comment on how most of us live, and it is a bleak one: “There's little to be gained and much to be risked by closely relating to another person.” Doing so requires putting aside some cherished secular values.

In each of us, the need for companionship, trust, and affection is balanced by an equal need for security and non-exposure. The lawyer only mirrors our own paralysis when he acts as he does. Almost all of us wish to care for others and to be cared for in return, but we fear the great risks of doing so – rejection, betrayal, ridicule, being left and isolated. Like the lawyer, faced with this choice, we may well opt for a relatively unhappy status quo rather than risking something worse.

So if the story leads us to indict the lawyer, we can scarcely avoid condemning our own failures in the process. Who among us would not prefer to remain unexposed in a personal relationship when demands for reciprocated vulnerability are made? [Did not Hugh Hefner make himself rich espousing just such a philosophy?]

Who would deny the attraction of being a Saturday or Sunday religionist, keeping religion in its weekend place rather than allow it to interfere with how we earn our livings or relate to the people around us?

Which of us would love an intruder who disrupts our lives, in preference to the people who share our values, flatter our decisions, curry our favor, and tell us what we wish to hear?

In this sense, we each share with the lawyer Bartleby's betrayal, and to the extent that unlike the lawyer we recognize our share of the act, lies the best measure of Melville's art. Bartleby is a screen upon which is played out this drama of self recognition; for within this pale figure rests one of Melville's most enduring gifts to his readers: the mirror wherein beholders see no faces but their own.

I promised I would provide a personal favorite way of viewing the story. I view half of it as portraying Bartleby as a cosmic question asker, with the brick wall which so fascinates him the equivalent of what Captain Ahab sees when he looks at the blank forehead of Moby-Dick: a blank slate, with no answers either provided or possible to the questions which most vex us. “Do you not see the reason for yourself?” then, becomes Bartleby's way of saying the only answers each of us are going to get to questions like “Why am I here?” or “What's the purpose of my life?” are those we learn to provide ourselves.

The story's second half would focus on the lawyer as a study in social failure, a klutz in interpersonal relations, a man who in the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne, has lost hold of the “magnetic chain of humanity,” what Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* calls “manly attachment,” what critic Newton Arvin terms “human solidarity.” Whatever its title, Melville suggests it's the best we poor creatures are likely to get in this life, in a world which continuously frustrates our wishes for definitive answers to



cosmic questions. "A man alone," writes Hemingway in one of his worst novels, "ain't got no bloody chance."

At this festive time of the year, that very old message takes on heightened meaning. We've heard it before, even if we're not familiar with Hawthorne, Whitman, or Herman Melville.

Owe no man anything, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. (*Romans 13:8*)

Here is a contemporary paraphrase by the man who is arguably the most important Jewish theologian of the 20th Century, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

To care for each other ardently, actively, is a way of worshipping God, a way of knowing and loving God. I call my own thinking the Theology of Presence. I don't know about the essence of God, but there is a presence. I am against the segregation of God in the church or synagogue. God exists above all in our sense of wonder and mystery in the sheer marvel of being alive, able to care for others.

Christian tradition might teach us that without such insight, Jesus is once more among us, being resacrificed through our indifference, our failure of mutual compassion, understanding, and abilities to extend humanity to those not only less fortunate than we, but those who look, act, and have very different values from us.

Jewish tradition might relay a *midrash*, an old rabbinic story, such as related to us from this pulpit last spring by Saint Louis University theologian, Belden Lane:

God creates the world, and on the seventh day announces, "I've done my work; now I will rest." And Adam and Eve say, "But God, you *can't* rest now. The world isn't finished." And God replies, "You're right. It's *not* done, but you will be my partners in creation. It's up to you to finish and perfect the world."

There's the ultimate challenge. To meet it likely requires something precious but unavailable to Adam and Eve and Bartleby: a community, a way for people to see themselves connected to others with a common constructive vision.



"Melville's 'Bartleby': The Mirror of Betrayal"

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To this very special congregation and community, and to each of you, my wife Phyllis and I send all our very best holiday wishes; and a New Year of connected peace and happiness.

Amen.