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A Sociological Reading of the Short Story Bartleby or Bartleby as a Social Microcosm

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A Sociological Reading of the Short Story *Bartleby*
or
Bartleby as a Social Microcosm



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Table of contents

Table of contents.....	1
Introduction.....	2
I. The characters' roles as a sociological frame for the novella.....	4
II. The literary “cog in the machine” in the persona of Bartleby.....	13
III. Atemporal nature of society.....	21
Bibliography.....	33

Introduction

Herman Melville began his literary career when he returned from the Pacific to the United States, with the two sea novels, *Typee* and *Omoo*, thus establishing himself as a specialist in adventure novels. Those two novels were critically and publicly acclaimed. Following these two early stories, he kept on writing, and published various books which started to drift away from the sea novel genre, up to the novel entitled *Mardi*. While critics reported that Melville was at last revealing his full potential, the deep philosophical focus of the book, as opposed to its adventurous dimension, put off his readers, and the publication of the book was a failure. In itself, this already established a pattern in his writing. The modernity of Melville's writing, as early as 1849-1850, held him back. His interactions with Nathaniel Hawthorne further developed his literary abilities. Indeed, in 1851, he published the masterpiece *Moby Dick*. In simple terms, one could assert that he finally encrusted the diamond of modernity in a ring of sea story. Nowadays globally established as one of the great American novels, it was far from being the case for his contemporary readers, and the income the book generated was not enough for him to live on.

As such, it is perhaps not mere oversimplification to assume that disillusion became, as far as Melville's literature is concerned, one of the most important themes we encounter throughout his work. The publication of the short story "Bartleby the Scrivener" marks a peak in terms of modernity. It was published along with two other short stories: "The Enchanted Isles" and "Benito Cereno". While the former consists in ten philosophical sketches of various forms, the latter is clearly reminiscent of the mix of sea novels and philosophical interrogations we found in *Moby Dick*, although not in the same manner. Indeed, in "Benito Cereno" Melville explores new social dimensions, most notably through the spectrum of slavery. His focus, in this way, is on the individuals that form society: Delano tries to unravel the mystery of the ship called the San Dominick, which is populated by sailors and black slaves, and by doing so, he allows us readers to have an external look on the interactions between the characters, thus deepening our understanding of the social mechanisms at work in the short story. In "Benito Cereno", the mystery is embodied by the eponymous character, the captain of the ship: he is at the center of the struggle, being the captain of the ship that has been taken over by the slaves. He embodies quite literally the mystery, but also the problem of the relation between the sailors and the black slaves. He is the axis around which the story revolves.

While “Bartleby” shares its fair amount of common characteristics with “Benito Cereno”, the short story goes deeper, for a simple reason: Bartleby is more than the axis around which the story revolves, he *is* the story. His interactions with the world around him – or his refusals to interact – give shape to the short story. The different interpretations that the story offer consequently take this fact into consideration.

What I suggest looking into here, is the way the character of Bartleby is depicted *as an actor in his environment*. In other words, I am interested in understanding Bartleby as a unique character, without overlooking the fact that he is, in a way, Melville’s answer to the sociological environment of the short story. Bartleby is thus put forward as a sociological *product* of the microcosm that is the short story. The narrator cannot understand his employee, because he is a reflexion of society itself: a literary explanation of society, as if Melville, in creating Bartleby, managed to “crack down” the modern world. Indeed, Wall Street, the environment of the story, is the modern city *per se*, and this mere fact is over-looked: the tale of this city – as is the original subtitle of the short story – is the tale of a city *beyond* cities. Wall Street, the modern city *par excellence*, is indeed the environment chosen by the author, for his truly modern character to evolve in. For what is Bartleby but an advanced look at modernity?

I. The characters' roles as a sociological frame for the novella

When we first stumble upon narration in *Bartleby*, our primary goal is to unravel the mysteries behind the character of the narrator. The very first words of Melville's short story, as well as the very last, are the narrator's. His presence in the text is enormous, especially when put in contrast with Bartleby's, and the way he is asserting his position from the very beginning is very much in the line of his behavior throughout the story: he is the one who knows, knowledge is his. The first person narrative dimension takes such an important role that it creates a world in itself (Marx 1953, 602-627). Indeed the narrator, in the line of those narrators addressing the "gentle reader" proceeds to explain his goal: to give an account of the life of Bartleby.

The understanding of the character of Bartleby by the narrator is the best indicator we have to assert his real nature. While every possible effort is made to keep an apparent surface of reliability, it is clear Bartleby completely baffles him. He is obsessed with the idea of having a written report of Bartleby while not even being able to mildly understand him: "It is an irreparable loss to literature. [...] What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, *that* is all I know of him." (Melville 1853, 1)

Thus, the first contradiction arises, for the narrator does not really seem to be who he pretends to be. From a narrative point of view, his desire to come up with a reliable narrative can only match his desire to *appear* reliable and overall trustworthy. As such, from the very beginning, he manifests this need; and the short story even begins as follow:

I am a rather elderly man. The nature of my avocations for the last thirty years has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been written: I mean the law-copyists or scribes.

Later on, he repeats the word "safe" ("consider me an eminently safe man" (Melville 1853, 1)). He convinces the reader of his ascendant, often in an extreme manner. His use of double negations "I was not unemployed" (Melville 1853, 1), of numerous digressions, most notably his relationship with "the late John Jacob Astor", make up for an affirmative character. He is a figure of power, in that he completely towers over everyone in the story. The fact that he is a homodiegetic narrator allows him to play on both sides of his "world": he plays with the reader, as well as with his employees. On the one hand, his power is near absolute, being deemed as the "active" character,

unlike the passivity of Bartleby. He addresses the reader directly, and the story as a whole is nothing but his point of view. On the other hand, his social status is clear, he is the one in charge; it is even more obvious towards Bartleby again, with whom he adopts a strongly paternalistic attitude, coupled with a Christian pity that is very much in the line of what Nietzsche described when he spoke of pity “allowing us to suffer along individuals”(Nietzsche 1954, 572-573). His actions towards Bartleby are “out of charity”, which asserts his explicit as well as implicit domination. This paradoxical nature is put into perspective when capitalism and Christianity as “forces” are compared within the character. Strictly on the level of the individual, the narrator asserts his superiority in many ways, which is to be understood as a strict consequence of the hierarchical order within the microcosm of the story. On every level, the narrator is presented as a figure of authority, almost as an allegory of power.

However, the apparent almightiness of the narrator is clearly just a facade. As it has already been exposed, contradictions are plenty. Cathy Davidson goes as far as explaining that the “narrative reality is conveyed through the opposing forces of the narrator”(Davidson 1978, 47-59). In other words, she explains that the contradictory forces within the narrator form the narrative reality: his quest for reliability is as important as his complete disregard for simplicity, his lack of knowledge of his new employee, seeing that all he knows is what he saw of him, is still enough for him to write a full report of the situation. The man who employs copyists for a living and is a trained lawyer clearly states that he is unable to provide “a full narrative” of Bartleby, which introduces the recurrent theme of confusion. Almost as precursors to Bartleby’s infamous formula “I would prefer not to”, the double negations he uses throughout the text come up as completely contradictory, especially so after he clearly states:

Imprimis: I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way to 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. (Melville 1853, 1)

His claim that “the easiest way to life is the best” cannot be true in that the syntax he chooses to use is everything but simple. Similarly, his choice of words is archaic, even at the time of the publication of the book: he uses words like “inasmuch, etc... On numerous instances he also resorts to using Latin. On the surface of things, everything seems indeed secure and real, however the narrator constantly avoids discussing what matters most. Truth, to him, is elusive. His

domination over the reader and the office that he rules is based on appearances. He loses himself in a fantasy: he is convinced of his good deeds, and never questions his own self, while pointing flaws in everyone. He exists as a figure of authority, as the boss-like figure, as the character in charge, but as a man, he is extremely narrow-minded and corrupted by bigotry. The fact that the narrator is depicted by Melville as feeling at ease in the environment of the story is extremely revealing: he is overly comfortable in this modern economy, working with the legal documents of rich men...all for his “pleasantly remunerative [salary]” (Melville 1853, 2). The extent of his dependency on the system he lives in is strictly proportional to the corruption of the said system: the narrator of *Bartleby, The Scrivener* is the emissary of the modern corporate world; in itself, this goes much further than the simple theme of corporal discontent. Melville is showing a great modernity in his works in that he proposes a narrator as an allegory of the modern world, a personification of capitalism.

As has been hinted at several times, the hypocrisy of the narrator can even lead to violence, which seems to be extremely paradoxical at first, for, as was pointed out earlier, he seemingly tries his very best to *appear* calm. But underneath the surface, all the contradictions within him are boiling.

On the very first occurrence of Bartleby’s refusal, the narrator confesses:

“I would prefer not to,” said he. I looked at him steadfastly[...]. 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. (Melville 1853, 6)

The fact that he would have “violently” done so is not the effect of mere chance. Everything the narrator pretends has to be carefully studied, because he is used to resorting to lies, and even has a recurrent tendency to violence.(Davidson 1978, 47-59) This “tendency” might express itself in straightforward terms, such as above, or here: “I would prefer not to.” With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously from my presence“ (Melville 1853, 7).

But it can also appear in more “subtle” hints, such as on the first occurrence of Bartleby’s refusal:

“Prefer not to,” echoed I, rising in high excitement, and crossing the room with a stride. “What do you mean? Are you moon-struck? I want you

to help me compare this sheet here—take it,” and I thrust it towards him.
“I would prefer not to,” said he.

Taken out of context, this short extract depicts a furious man, who shall not hesitate to resort to violence when needed; this precise idea is more than confirmed by this highly comical sentence a few lines later: “I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors.” The understatement that this sentence represents is a good example of the extent of the irony behind the character of the narrator in the short story. There is an enormous discrepancy between the way the action is described, and what it really means: “throwing his statue out of the window”. It is obvious Melville used humor and irony to fully depict his narrator of *Bartleby*.

The extent of the role of the narrator as the narrative I/eye is tremendous. As the story advances, one can even credit him with the death of Bartleby. After all, he did lead him to “the Tombs”, where he will eventually die. Symbolically, the narrator killed Bartleby, he is responsible for his death. Richard Harter goes as far as saying that “The narrator plays the role of fate”(Harter 1966, 26). He is the permanent *réfèrent* throughout the novella. His omnipresence dictates the narrative flow, and he follows Bartleby through his gradual, and then absolute, isolation. The modernist tale is illustrated by this reflexion by the narrator after a moment of solitude:

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. (Melville 1953, 12)

In this paragraph, according to the narrator, Broadway is associated with the Mississippi, and the city re-appropriates its original meaning, of a “broad way” (Fleurdorge 1978, 82). This idea succeeds in creating a clear contrast between the inside world, the office, and the “infinite”, ever-moving outside, embodied by the metaphor of the river, recurrent theme in American literature. The world of Bartleby is a small island surrounded by currents of literature, a parenthesis within the world of arts. The modern city *par excellence* of New York, and thus Wall Street, contributes to the symbolical modernity of the narrative reality of the short story.

Nippers and Turkey form a literary couple that is the first clear and straightforward apparition of the theme of doubles in the short story *Bartleby*. Their very existence in the self-contained world that is the office, which is a closed atmosphere typical of Melville's work, and reminiscent of works such as *Moby Dick* or *Benito Cereno*, revolves around their duality. In the same manner as a near infinite sea around the microcosm of the story, the world of Wall Street completely circles and strangles the lawyer's office.

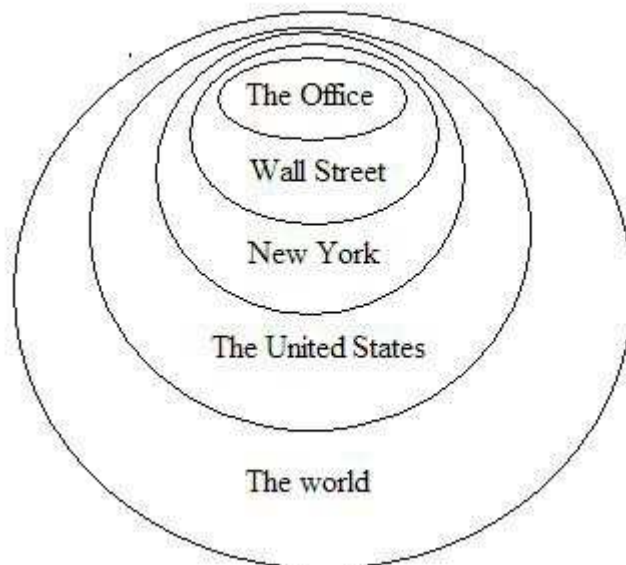
Richard Harter argues that: "the object of Melville's visions are microcosms, complex and full.[...] In the novels, his ships(...) are self-contained, complete worlds"(Harter 1966, 24). The very idea of a literary microcosm imposes a narrative space narrowed down to a minimum. In such an environment, the theme of doubling is recurring. The narrator forms with Bartleby a phantom double, for the activeness of one compensates the passivity of the other, one takes all the narrative space while the other balances it out by being characterized by absence... Nippers and Turkey form the other double of the story, and their symmetry is perfectly balanced. The narrator exposes their duality with the words :

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 Nippers' was on, Turkey's was off; and *vice versa*. This was a good natural arrangement under the circumstances.(Melville 1853, 4)

Indeed, Nippers is productive only in the afternoon, when Turkey is drunk, and useless in the morning because of his indigestions, when Turkey is the most efficient. The couple they form is solar: based on the rotations of the stars. Every trait of their characters is mirrored: while the elderly alcoholic Turkey does not hesitate to use his old age as an excuse, comparing it with the narrator to lessen his flaws; Nippers and his indigestions is very ambitious, and looks down on his work as a scrivener. While alcoholism tends to appear at a later age, ambition is perhaps more commonly present among younger individuals. Their vices are parallel: both share specific although completely antagonistic bodily conditions – Turkey wants alcohol in, Nippers' stomach wants food out – they respectively reject and attract outside substances. They also share antagonist moral values when it comes to work: Turkey's pledge for indulgence opposes Nippers' ambition and shady side jobs (his "business" at the Tombs).

Now those two characters are obviously not realistic. Their very existence flirts with irony, reflecting vaguely stereotypical personalities of Wall Street, portraying absurd men with extreme traits. Their presence is said to bring some comical relief to the short story, which is quite dark as a whole. (Fiene 1970, 18-25)

However, Turkey and Nippers bring us much more than comic relief in itself, for they represent a very precise sociological sample of the Wall Street population. However, their qualification does not allow them to work as lawyers. Instead, they are reduced to the role of mere workers, forced to do the work of scribes, which they both hate and resent. Their duality very symbolically stands for a group, that is to say workers in general, as opposed to the figure of the narrator who symbolizes the one in charge. They give the office and thus the short story its sociological frame, beyond their duality, they are the representatives of the corporate workers of Wall Street, for what is New York but the financial capital city of the United States? Turkey and Nippers thus form the very emissaries of the people of the United States. The very office is the sociological microcosm standing for the nation as a whole, and the world:



The circles of symbolism to which the microcosm of the office extend to.

The address of the office itself, “My chambers were up stairs at No. — Wall-street.” is symbolical: it has no number, there is a topographic blank instead of a number: it could be anywhere (Melville

1853, 1). This extreme symbolism behind the couple of Turkey and Nippers representing the workforce in general throughout the world allows us to call into perspective the early socialist ideas: Melville does examine the alienation of labor in the American capitalist economy.

Richard Harter asserts that: “[...]Turkey and Nippers together, they form an allegory of the English and American national character” (Harter 1966, 23). Indeed, Turkey, the Dickensian character, the caricatural Englishman, plus the young, ambitious and bad-tempered younger man who never quite knows what he wants form a symbolical sample of the biggest minorities of the American population of Wall Street.

Their subordination to the narrator is never called into question, for the point of view of the latter is completely biased. Turkey and Nippers exist because of their roles rather than as individuals. The narrator is very quick in demonstrating the flaws in the characters of Turkey and Nippers, without ever glancing at his own. For instance, he describes Turkey in very pitiful terms on page 6:

“There was a strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity about him. He would be incautious in dipping his pen into his inkstand. All his blots upon my documents, were dropped there after twelve o’clock, meridian. Indeed, not only would he be reckless and sadly given to making blots in the afternoon, but some days he went further, and was rather noisy. At such times, too, his face flamed with augmented blazonry, as if cannel coal had been heaped on anthracite. He made an unpleasant racket with his chair; spilled his sand-box; in mending his pens, impatiently split them all to pieces, and threw them on the floor in a sudden passion; stood up and leaned over his table, boxing his papers about in a most indecorous manner, very sad to behold in an elderly man like him.”(Melville 1853, 2)

Obsessed by Turkey’s “blots on his documents”, the narrator reduces him to the smallest level of humanity; while often subject to changes of temper himself – although copiously trying to hide them from the reader – he looks down on him for his temperament is “very sad to behold in an elderly man like him”, which is extremely condescending and hypocritical, for he refuses to see these very same flaws in his own character. Similarly, Nippers is reduced to his indigestion/ambition paradigm: “I always deemed him the victim of two evil powers—ambition and indigestion”(Melville 1853, 3).

The narrator’s habit of stopping his judgment on the surface of things and never going underneath is revelatory in the sense that the narrative eye, or the internal focalization, allows the reader to fully understand the turmoils of his conscience for the moral issues to come.

Ginger Nut is by far the youngest character in the short story. He is supposed to be studying law, as was the last will of his father:

“Ginger Nut, the third on my list, was a lad some twelve years old. His father was a carman, ambitious of seeing his son on the bench instead of a cart, before he died. So he sent him to my office as student at law, errand boy, and cleaner and sweeper, at the rate of one dollar a week. He had a little desk to himself, but he did not use it much.”(Melville 1853, 4)

The last will of his father, the “carman” evidently failed: he does not “use much” his “little desk”. The hope of the father to see his son rise the social ladder has been completely ignored by the narrator. If anywhere in the novel, the social criticism expressed by Melville in *Bartleby* has to be condensed in that quote: the narrator states the romantic hope in trivial words, only to completely dismiss it later on. The son of a carman cannot possibly claim to the condition of lawyer, which he puts above everything else, almost creating a different subspecies of humankind: lawyers and the rest.

Not the least among the employments of Ginger Nut, as well as one which he discharged with the most alacrity, was his duty as cake and apple purveyor for Turkey and Nippers. [...] . . . Also, they sent Ginger Nut very frequently for that peculiar cake--small, flat, round, very spicy--after which he had been named by them. (Melville 1853, 4)

As were Turkey and Nippers, Ginger Nut is reduced to his professional role, and quite literally so: his very name is the name of the cake he is supposed to bring to his fellow coworkers. He has no substance in itself, apart from the particularities of the cake: “small, flat, round, very spicy”. The use of irony is evident when the narrator then comments on Ginger Nut’s concern about law in general : “Indeed, to this quick-witted youth the whole noble science of the law was contained in a nut-shell.” (Melville 1853, 4)

He is “quick-witted”, which one could relate to the spiciness of ginger, but his professional ambition concerning law is “contained in a nut-shell”; reduced to a botanical state, his humanity does not extend the shell he is characterized with. The ambition of his father is very drastically reduced to an ironical nut: the sum of all his knowledge on law is reduced to a “drawer exhibit(ing) a great array of the shells of various sorts of nuts.”(Melville 1853, 3)

The child does not seem to express any form of discontent with his work. His role, in reality,

is far from central, playing on the theatricality note along Turkey and Nippers. He does however contrast with the rest of the characters in the sense that his youth is a form of hope, as opposed to the old age of the narrator and Turkey, and of course Bartleby. From an optimistic perspective, he represents the future of the profession. Realistically, in the microcosm of the office, he is lowest rank in the hierarchy.

The folding glass door which separates the narrator from the other workers is both physical and symbolical: only he has access to the rank of professional in the law business, while the others are simple laborers; the stratification of society is literal, and the world of Wall Street satirized: even Ginger Nut is used as a tool by society, the reason of his occupying the lowest rank in the office is the ambition of his late father.

The narrator, Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut, in this sense, form the sociological frame of the short story. Every character has his own specific traits, and they all extend to a complex symbolism. Together, they form the frame, the microcosm within the office. The stability of said microcosm is challenged with the arrival of Bartleby. This literal disruption of order is the central force of the short story.

II. The literary “cog in the machine” in the persona of Bartleby

Shortly after Melville is done presenting his office stage, Bartleby enters the scene:

“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.”

The peculiarity of Bartleby strikes from the very beginning: on his first appearance, he is already “motionless”. He does not enter, he just “stands there”, on the threshold of the office. Does he actually ever enter? The metaphor of the threshold is very evocative of the future of Bartleby as a character. He “stands” in between two realms, he never quite crosses the line of reality.

When the narrator says “I can see that figure now”, he is implying that his mental representation of Bartleby changes: from the past, the tense of the narration, his vision emerges and he is now able to form a mental representation of Bartleby *as a man*. Ronald Wesley Hoag, in *The Corpse in the Office* explains: “[the narrator] converts Bartleby from man to symbol, in effect announcing, ‘I can now see him for the figure he was.’” (1992, 3) His first appearance on stage is unmistakably *odd*, for when he first shows up, his very humanity is challenged. In fact, he is closer to a corpse than a human from his very first apparition: he is “motionless”, as well as “pallidly neat”. Those adjectives are repeated throughout the text, and the metaphor of Bartleby as a cadaver extends to the office, which is a sort of tomb. (Hoag 1992, 2) The paradoxicality of his entering the office on his own initiative “In answer to my advertisement” [the narrator’s] (Melville 1853, 4), where he will find his own death is the first of a long series. Indeed, paradoxicality as a concept defines the very character of Bartleby, who is always dangling between two lines; namely life and death in this case.

The epitome of his paradoxicality lies in his infamous “stance”: “I would prefer not to”, which the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze explains in the following words:

sa terminaison abrupte, NOT TO, qui laisse indéterminé ce qu’elle repousse, lui confère un caractère radical, une sorte de fonction-limite. Sa reprise et son insistance la rendent d’autant plus insolite, toute entière. Murmurée d’une voix douce, patiente, atone, elle atteint à l’irrémissible, en formant un bloc inarticulé, un souffle unique. (Deleuze, 2003)

On its first occurrence, which he said “in a singularly mild, firm voice” (Melville 1853, 5), the narrator is in denial: “I sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying my stunned faculties”. Then, gradually, the denial turns into anger, confusion and acceptance. Gradually, Bartleby moves away from the office, from his coworkers and from society itself. Ronald Wesley Hoag goes as far as interpreting Bartleby “as a functional memento mori” (Hoag 1992, 3).

From a literary point of view, Bartleby stands out in many a way. As far as the plot is concerned, the climax of the story is arguably reached upon the death of the uncommon scrivener; in less than three pages, Bartleby opposes the narrator for the last time, is sent to the prison, where he dies. This sordid end encourages the reader to have a more profound reading of all the elements leading up to the end (the death) of the eponymous character of the story. Once again, Bartleby as a character is defined by absence rather than presence, an affirmation which stands true on every level of the story. His existence is expressed through what he does not do, instead of what he does. Thus, when the narrator tries to define Bartleby, or classify him, he inevitably fails. He cannot classify Bartleby, who does not seem to belong to any “category”. He will try to do so for the whole duration of the text, in vain. This absence of certainty is striking, especially so when put in perspective with the way he depicts his other employees, whom he classifies and “explains” from the very beginning. Bartleby is as mysterious as Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut are common. Thus, Bartleby is weakened progressively in that he is forced to fit into the category in which he belongs – category that he cannot possibly access. The lawyer has him enter his office, then gradually proceeds to get him out, finally leading him into prison, where he will die. It is impossible for him to understand Bartleby because of the difference in their respective natures: he, as “a man of reason”, wants to ease his stay at the Tombs, in vain:

“Does he want to starve? If he does, let him live on the prison fare, that’s all.”

“Who are you?” asked I, [...]

“I am the grub-man. Such gentlemen as have friends here, hire me to provide them with something good to eat.”

“Is this so?” said I, turning to the turnkey.

He said it was.

“Well then,” said I, slipping some silver into the grub-man’s hands (for so they called him). “I want you to give particular attention to my friend there; let him have the best dinner you can get. And you must be as polite to him as possible.” (Melville 1853, 26)

And yet Bartleby's only answer is "I prefer not to dine to-day' [...]. 'It would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners.'"(Melville 1853, 26). It is useless to take care of his dinner, for he simply does not eat. He is an dead-like figure, as has been confirmed several times by the numerous instances where he is referenced to as a cadaver; his refusal to eat is just another instance of the extended metaphor of death. Indeed, every sort of link to humanity is denied. He is disconnected from every world the short story has to offer: the office, the city of Wall Street, the prison... The only element that validates his being in the story is his *body* - his *corpse* - presence; the key in understanding Bartleby lies in understanding the performativity of absence¹. By essence paradoxical, it defines Bartleby as a character. He exists by "not being there". Similarly, he refuses what does not exist ("I would prefer not to" refers to a preference which just cannot apply, since he refuses point blank.). On page 24 of the short story, the narrator vividly tries to have Bartleby choose an occupation – so as not to have him sit on the "banister" all the time – but the only answer he can get out of him is the famous "I would prefer not to", although Bartleby adds something of interest: "I am not particular", which he repeats thrice. Now the very idea of particularity defines Bartleby as a character. For him to claim being un-particular not only is paradoxical, it is also downright ironical.

In what could pass as almost Darwinian terms, Davidson goes as far as saying, when it comes to Bartleby's refusal to act, that it would have been clearer if he said no, "we would have known it was a fight all along". A fight that he could obviously not win. (Davidson 1978, 12).

The complexity of the character of the Bartleby is very clearly contrasted by his environment. Characters around him may very well extend to the world, that is to say the narrator, Turkey & Nippers stand for society as it exists, but he is the one apart. He is as unique as they are common. Melville's point, no matter the reading of the short story, revolves around Bartleby as a "product", or a "consequence", of his environment: the idealized society that is presented, which is nothing less than a sample of the corporate world, is minimalized to the extreme. The minimal treatment of society allows the existence of a continuity – thus mimicking the "real" world – out of which the symbolism of Bartleby is given life. Bartleby is the flower growing out of the ground of the office, which has only seen mere grass so far. The static world of the office, which is conveyed through the spectrum of the narrator, obeys to convention within the very realm of the novel. Indeed, while the symbolism of the office extends to the world, the very realm of the book is to be understood in a perspective proper to "the usual self-containment of Melville's worlds." (Fogle 1966, 26)

1 cf. M1 course of M. Ludot-Vlasak, Université Stendhal, 2011

This symbolical closing up of the world clearly emphasizes the power of irony within the text, and mainly extends to the narration. Indeed, while the character of Bartleby is understandably the focus of most interpretations, as has been pointed out earlier, his presence has less to do with irony than it seems: Melville's ambition in creating Bartleby is much more profound than mere irony, although its use is recurrent in the short story. It is of some importance to note that the world of the office, that is to say the world of the novella, comes supposedly directly from the narrator. His narrative power is supposedly responsible for the very book every reader is holding in his/her hands. While he very vehemently tries to convince the reader of his reliability, his very legitimacy makes little to no sense; one can argue that the whole story, the whole book *per se* only exists as a means to present a justification concerning the behavior of the narrator towards Bartleby. (Widmer 1969, 448) The presence of irony is flagrant, and it clearly indicts the lawyer and his pretense of legitimacy, inevitably doomed to fail.

On the same register, it is worth having a closer look at one of the fundamental symbolical pillars of the book, and more particularly the reaction of the narrator to it, as it probably represents the most notable alteration to the continuity of the universe of the book: Bartleby's stance "I would prefer not to." Indeed, while it seemingly shakes the very foundations of the world of the narrator, he actually acts in a similar manner throughout the short story: "I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds." (Melville 1853, 1) It is very obvious he *prefers not to* work in a more prestigious office.

In the following paragraph he even goes ahead and says: "The good old office [...] of a Master in Chancery, had been conferred upon me." The passive structure demonstrates that the choice was not even his, even though he wanted it, it appears it was more given to him than anything else, and he accepted it, without making a ripple on the narrative sea. Which is what he, in a way, reproaches Bartleby with. Similarly, he prefers not to change a thing in his office, to ease the work of his employees; he prefers not to pay them more either.

The identity of the narrator as a lawyer is well established, and has a fundamental influence over the course of the story: as the narrator, he *rules* over it. In the world of New York however, his role as a lawyer is extremely limited: "I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause" (Melville 1853, 1). Ironically, his omnipotence as *the lawyer* is called into question: the only "jury" he ever "addresses" is extremely limited, being restricted to his office, as well as his story, as far as narration is concerned, the reader being his actual jury.

The world of *Bartleby, The Scrivener*, from which Bartleby the character emerges in such a particular way, has an appearance of stability and order, which emulates the real world. Interestingly enough, the closer we look at it, the more fragile its frame actually appears. In his attempt at emulating the real world, Melville also reproduced its arguably chaotic foundations. Indeed, the social order of the short story holds in place because of the status of the narrator, his trustworthiness is the cement of the plot. And as such, the literary illusion goes as far as the natural reader's tendency to trust the narrator. However, the very point of Bartleby as a character is to challenge this very idea of stability; he will gradually provoke, ignore, or rebel against the narrator, so as to, little by little, shatter the pre-established existence of the world, until, inexorably, the lawyer does not get to make the laws anymore. The lawyer's only tangible realm of influence, his narrative, is even subjected to corrupt standards: laws as such do not even apply; the narrative is full of double standards. Thus, although everything looks neat and well-organized on the surface, uncertainty and doubt are boiling underneath.² The character of Bartleby is the embodiment of this doubt.

The microcosm within the office has been shaken ever since the arrival of Bartleby. The narrator's paradoxical drives are the main reasons behind Bartleby's stay, as was pointed out earlier, and the narrator is also responsible for his gradual isolation. However Bartleby as a character has a direct impact on society. The voices of Turkey and Nippers are the first the narrator queries, followed by Ginger Nut's:

“Turkey,” said I, “what do you think of this? 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.”
[...]
“Ginger Nut,” said I, willing to enlist the smallest suffrage in my behalf, “what do *you* think of it?”
“I think, sir, he's a little *lunny*,” (Melville 1853, 7-8)

In other words, the shadowy copyist is responsible for the moral turmoil the narrator is going through, as well as the sociological upheaval his presence triggers. The narrator's need for approbation matches his whole uncertainty about the presence of Bartleby. This applies to the world within the office, reaching the proportions we know – that is to say Bartleby's self inflicted incapacitation when it comes to writing, thus rendering his presence in the office as a copyist absurd – as well as the world outside of the office:

2 cf. M1 course of M. Ludot-Vlasak, Université Stendhal, 2011

Also, when a Reference was going on, and the room full of lawyers and witnesses and business was driving fast; some deeply occupied legal gentleman present, seeing Bartleby wholly unemployed, would request him to run round to his (the legal gentleman's) office and fetch some papers for him. Thereupon, Bartleby would tranquilly decline, and yet remain idle as before. Then the lawyer would give a great stare, and turn to me. And what could I say? At last I was made aware that all through the circle of my professional acquaintance, a whisper of wonder was running round, having reference to the strange creature I kept at my office. This worried me very much. (Melville 1853, 20)

Now it is difficult to say that the incentive for Bartleby's departure comes from the narrator himself; for his status, as well as his apparent similarity with the copyist (cf the theme of the double evoked earlier) arguably prevented him from "getting rid" (as he put it) of Bartleby. Rather, it is of some importance to note that the world *as a whole*, that is to say society, rejected Bartleby. His incompatibility with his coworkers, his industrial uselessness as well as the various spiteful looks are the reasons behind the narrator's decision to "move out of his old office". In fact, the narrator could never get rid of Bartleby: it is not the copyist who moved but himself, followed by the office as a whole. Bartleby's passivity is renewed in the sense that he was not even the one who separated from the office, he was just left behind. His death, sealing the end of his *story*, merely stands for his societal end. For what is truly the point of the narrative but a reminder of a certain disturbance in the life of its author? The disruption Bartleby caused has never been as alive as when the narrator presumably decided to lay down his experience on paper.

The only clear effect the character of Bartleby has over the society he enters and leaves is disruption. His presence – defined by absence – is gradually rejected by society as a whole, which ultimately leads to his death. Now the only thing we know for sure in terms of *roles* is his profound inadaptability, the impossibility of him *fitting in*.

Donald M. Fiene, in *Melville Annual 1965. A Symposium: Bartleby the Scrivener*, published "A Bibliography of Criticism of 'Bartleby the Scrivener.'" In his bibliography, he listed the different interpretations of the peculiarity of Bartleby, as well as identifying specific trends. Indeed, in the forties and the fifties, scholars and critics saw the short story as a satire of transcendentalism, or a parable of the artist. The process of isolation from society, narrated in *Walden*, as well as Thoreau's essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience", draw interesting parallels with *Bartleby*;

Thoreau's refusing to pay his poll tax, as well as his night in jail as a result could certainly have influenced the idea behind the "I would prefer not to" stance.

The main difference between this direct interpretation of *Bartleby*, as is the case for most interpretations of the tale in fact, comes down to motives. While Thoreau's motive is explicit: "I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually" (Thoreau 1, 1849), Bartleby's refusal has no apparent ground. It is not based on any rational argument. "I would prefer not to" even denotes a *refusal* to refuse.

I chose this example among several, so as to elaborate on a point which is primordial in any attempt at understanding *Bartleby*: ever since the renewal in interest for the work of Melville in general - precisely because of the reedition of his works in the Constable Edition of Melville's complete works - every reading has been focusing on particular aspects which define *Bartleby*, extending them to such an extent drawing a parallel is possible, as is the case with Thoreau. The main issue it raises is the fact that such readings of *Bartleby* are highly uncertain. Minimalism as a concept defines the very character of Bartleby. The writing of the short story simply does not contain enough elements to assess any reading in particular: the very point of the tale is precisely this lack of information, to the point of a *mise en abyme*. The character of Bartleby echoes his narrative, which is echoed in the very creation of its main character. Nothing is ascertainable, or as Melville put it "all truth is profound". The very point of *Bartleby* is resisting literary interpretation, in the same way Bartleby resists any sort of "fitting in" in the society he belongs. In this sense, the shadowy scrivener standing for literature as a whole seems to be the only reasonable assumption: Bartleby conceals meaning the same way as literature exists as a buffer between art and meaning. This is explicitly echoed in the first page of the short story: "It is an irreparable loss to literature." As if Melville asserted the essence of *Bartleby* from the very beginning.

Bartleby's nature remains intrinsically hidden. He exists as a (barely) living reminder of the impossibility for the narrator to grasp the deeper meanings of life. His ghostly form haunts the conscience of the narrator for its very existence negates all of his inner convictions. What was Melville's intent in creating a character situated half way between a specter and a man? How does such a being, by his mere presence, mirror the inefficiency of the narrator to master his environment?

What Melville mocks in *Bartleby* parallels *Benito Cereno*. It is a sympathetic but ironic critical analysis of the practical optimist, the blandly benevolent rationalist, as a representative liberal American. The narrating attorney, like Captain Delano and Captain Vere in Melville's other novellas, provides an image of a decent, well-meaning, prudent, rationalizing enforcer of established values. Such figures miserably fail in a deeper awareness of humanity. Melville thus indicts, I believe, one of the major traditions of what has passed for normal reasonableness, in our time as well as in his time. (Widmer 1969, vol. 1 n°4)

This short extract of Widmer's study on *Bartleby* represents a strong criticism of the perspective of the narrator, going as far as extending this perspective to other works of Melville, so as to state the fact that it slowly evolved into a global norm : "one of the major traditions of what has passed for normal reasonableness, in our time as well as in his time". While this critic is entitled to his point of view, it is interesting to think about the *normality* he evokes. *Bartleby The Scrivener* clearly belongs to a specific *stage* in Melville's writing; *Benito Cereno*, *Pierre*, and even *Moby Dick* to a certain extent could have been studied in parallel, in the sense that they share a certain tendency to hint at mentioning without ever mentioning it. The complex rendering of the characters is the spectrum through which the sensible reader is susceptible to have a glimpse at reality. To quote Melville himself: "meaning is multiple and not to be lightly read".

Having looked at the *what* of the novella, as well as analyzing the *how*, what I propose to do now is to have a look at the *why*.

III. Atemporal nature of society

Understanding the reasons behind Bartleby's behavior is a complex task. One of the peculiarities of the short story itself is its retaining of information; the character of Bartleby is defined by minimalism. A sociological understanding of the novella implies a thorough understanding of the society it creates. As such, interpretations are multiple, even featuring the narrator as the main character of the story, instead of Bartleby. What never changes though is the disruption caused by the irruption of Bartleby in the microcosm of the office, which consequently establishes what appears to be one of the best guarded secrets in the history of literature: Bartleby's motives.

The first layer of comprehension, as well as the simplest, is the following: Bartleby as a champion of the working class; or even *the* "working class hero". Indeed, as Barbara Foley explains in "From Wall Street to Astor Place: Historicizing Melville's *Bartleby*":

Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* [...] has to this point been exempted from a thoroughgoing historical recontextualization; its subtitle remains to be fully explained. [...] Criticism of "Bartleby" has rarely explored Melville's interest or involvement in current social conflicts and political discourses; "Wall Street" has thus functioned largely as metonymy rather than as constitutive context and locale. (2000)

Indeed, the political context of the time easily favors a reading which would see in Bartleby a clear example of popular discontent. Not only is Wall Street *literalized* as early as in the second page of the short story³ "[...] My windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade" (Melville 1853, 2), it also brings about a complex cultural and historical context at the same time, a town defined by its walls.

Similarly, the Wall Street that is being depicted is symbolized: "My chambers were up stairs at No. — Wall-street." (Melville 1853, 2). There is no address, it could be anywhere in Wall Street, the number does not matter because it is precisely like a thousand more. The lack of identity echoes the stereotypical treatment of the characters of Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut: their condition matters more than their actual self. Michael J. Cummings, in his "Bartleby The Scrivener, A Study Guide", goes as far as explaining:

3 cf. M1 course of M. Ludot-Vlasak, Université Stendhal, 2011

Bartleby's refusal to follow orders reflects the discontent of exploited workers who were pressing for reform in the middle of the nineteenth century. Their activism led to the foundation of the National Labor Union and the Knights of Labor in the 1860s and the powerful American Federation of Labor in 1886. (2009)

Bartleby's absence of voice for himself could possibly mean that he is actually standing for his class as a whole, with silence as his answer to oppression, and passive resistance as a way of life. This goes hand in hand with the way Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut are depicted, as representatives of the working class, as opposed to the narrator standing for hierarchy and capitalistic oppression. Barbara Foley explains:

The narrator treats his employees like wage slaves : he erects screens and barriers between himself and them; he views them as "useful" and "valuable"; and he reduces individuality to idiosyncrasy, viewing the scribes' peculiarities (including their poverty) as intrinsic rather than caused by their relation to him. He offers charity rather than higher wages and, when pressed to the wall (as it were), invokes property rights; fearing both social upheaval and the bad opinion of his professional peers, he allows state power to take its course and to cart Bartleby off to the Tombs of capitalist justice. (2000)

The narrator, thus pictured as the evil-doer, as opposed to Bartleby's angel-like innocence, absorbs all the characteristics of the late 19th century greedy business man: under religion as a pretence, profit is his only real motive, and profit is obtained by getting the most out of people. Which is precisely what constitutes his little "snug retreat", or sanctuary of capitalistic oppression.

I maintain the fact that this interpretation just cannot be evicted. Undeniable truths prove its validity. Indeed, a sociological reading of *Bartleby* consists in looking at the world of the novella in terms of interactions between individuals, as well as looking at the clash between classes. However, limiting a reading of *Bartleby* to a representation of popular discontent in the second half of the 19th century would be a vast underestimation of the literary value of the short story.

As such, a second layer of comprehension would be to picture Bartleby in a continuum: as far as his very life is concerned, the shadowy scrivener is strictly limited to the will of the narrator. He is the motive of the narrative, and cannot possibly exist outside the realm of narration, having no

substance as a human being of his own. His absence of *will* prevents him from an actual *life*, since the very fact that he *lives* is debatable.

Therefore, it is easy to identify a “pre-Bartleby” period as opposed to a “post-Bartleby” period. The “pre-Bartleby” period is of course hypothetical, since the narrative is retrospective: at the time of the actual writing of the story, the scrivener is long gone. However, the “post-Bartleby” period is supposedly clearly defined, theoretically englobing the whole story (since the time of narration is after his death), but in practice being confined to the very end, right after his death. Interestingly enough, this is far from being the case, as Bartleby as a *state* lingers throughout the novella, and actually extends to the whole life of the narrator, since the motive behind the writing of his narrative is the presence of the shadowy scrivener. Thus, Bartleby the character emerges as a temporal force; the microcosm of the novella exists as an autonomous entity *per se* until its very foundations are shaken to the core by the scrivener. Society as it is being presented is thus going through different phases characterized by the perturbation of Bartleby:

- (Hypothetical “golden”) Order of society
- Disorder (with the arrival of the “disruptive element”)
- Order again (with his departure)

What is interesting to note is the fact that society did not change. The world of the office has been disturbed, but everything went “back to normal” as soon as the “disruptive element” left. There was no evolution, and no change either. The only thing attesting for the “passage” of the scrivener is the very book, in other words, the memories he left in the mind of the narrator.

The character of Bartleby completely lacks vitality, and can thus be understood in terms of temporality: rather than a mere human interaction with the world he belongs to, he marked society with his lack of presence. Ultimately though, the scrivener’s role in the novella has to be apprehended – in perhaps a third layer of understanding – as a concept going far beyond humanity. A sociological reading forces us to understand him with the light of his environment, and as such, his role is intelligently described by William Hamilton:

The lawyer is the world trying to understand what message it is that Bartleby is bringing. But the lawyer’s world, just as in "Benito Cereno" and *Billy Budd*, is in the grip of evil here, the evil of Wall Street, lawyers, and all the corruptions of a nascent American capitalism. Bartleby is both messenger and message,

the medium who is the message: love me with an absolute love, believe utterly in me. But the decent old lawyer, the well-meaning, prudent American, cannot hear. So the messenger-God must die.

(Hamilton 1989)

It is one thing to apprehend the world of the novella as evil, but it is another to think of Bartleby as a messenger whose message is *himself*. Whatever his intention may be, his inner will is contained precisely in his lack thereof.

The Christian light this interpretation brings – humility, renunciation of the self, “dying”, not “for our sins” but because of our inability to understand – is favorable in our comprehension of Bartleby in that it aims at explaining the very means he uses, and not only the end. His behavior not only has an ultimate goal and signification, it also contains meaning *per se*. Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” stance not only describes his life – in the narration – as a whole, it also expresses his latent renunciation of life.

In order to understand this perspective of the character of Bartleby, one needs to have a closer look at the religious heritage behind the writing of the novella. Buddhism as the highest form of an attempt at answering metaphysical questions, rather than as a religion, has been present in American literature for decades. Walter Sutton, in his article “Melville and the Great God Budd” explains:

Emerson, the Transcendentalist preacher who could not hold to a Christian creed, was attracted to the sacred books of India. Thoreau at Walden pondered the Bhagavad-Gita, the whistle of the steam locomotive, the improved means to an unimproved end, in his ears. Whitman, with whom the “beat” writers most consciously identify, attempted to relate the technology of his day to the mystical heritage of the East. (Sutton 1960, 128)

He then proceeds to relate Melville to this by evoking his own interest for Buddhism and his relation to pessimism. Sutton adds “A poem entitled “Buddha”, extolling the state of Nirvana, appeared in *Timoleon*, the volume of poems published in 1891.” The ascetical dimension of Bartleby has to be looked at in the light of this Eastern perspective. On page 20, Melville writes :“‘I prefer not to dine to-day’, said Bartleby, turning away. ‘It would disagree with me, I am unused to dinners.’” But this is not where it ends. Bartleby does not utter any other words, but the narrator comments, in an excessively interesting manner, on the way the scrivener behaves after his answer: “So saying he slowly moved to the other side of the inclosure, and took up a position fronting the dead-wall.” From the corporate world where his only sight out of the windows was *walls*, Bartleby is transferred into the Tombs, where he will face exactly the same fate: *walls*. It is a prison after all,

where one is “locked in between four walls”. The parallel between Wall Street as a place where walls are everywhere and the prison is reminiscent of the way the world of finance has been depicted. However, the wall here is not only “bleak”, as it used to be the case around the office, it is *dead*.

Death not only is echoed throughout the book, but it also seems to reflect the true purpose behind the character of the “pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn” scrivener. Indeed, Hamilton advanced that “the messenger-god” must die, for his message cannot be heard, but with even more certitude, one can assert that Bartleby entered a process of *renunciation of life*, typically in the line of Schopenhauer. The German philosopher, in *The World as Will and Idea*, proposes two approaches to escape from the slavery of the will, which he defines as the driving force of life, in a very pessimistic manner. The first one is the “aesthetic approach” which consists in escaping through art, and the second one – which is of foremost interest here – is the “ascetic approach”, which consists in the renunciation of life. The aim still being freedom from the will, which defines Bartleby as a character to the perfection. What better example of renunciation than the very fact of refusing to refuse? “I would prefer not to” is the literary epitome of Schopenhauer’s ideas, and Bartleby is the avatar of his beliefs. The only “choice” available for man is thus Bartleby’s: choosing not to choose, choosing not to care, to the point of choosing not to live.

As pointed out earlier, the novella arguably follows a classical pattern, of order – disorder – order. The microcosm of the office failed to perform as it normally did because of the presence of Bartleby. However, after his death, it goes back to normal: the symbolical killing of the scrivener by the narrator allowed society as a whole to resume its industrial course, or its moral endeavors, it is mostly a question of point of view; for in what seems but a glimpse behind the surface, the narrator proposes an interesting vision of what he sees: “And so I found him there, standing all alone in the quietest of the yards, his face towards a high wall, 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.” (Melville 1853, 42) Society’s way of looking at Bartleby has never been egalitarian: the narrator took every chance he could to de-humanize the scrivener, taking his humanity away (“forlorn”, “ghostly” etc...). Here, in what appears to be a highly reclusive place, Bartleby paradoxically seems to be at the very center of attention, in a sort of Eden-like place: “Look, there is the sky, and here is the grass.”, “the quietest of the yards”, the prison as the garden of Eden of capitalism, in all its unholiness. And society (“all around”), gathered behind the eye of the narrator, sees Bartleby “from the narrow slits of the jail windows”, revealing its true nature: “murderers and thieves”. For who is indeed looking

at Bartleby - “peering out upon him” even – but the narrator? He is the thief, robbing him of his humanity, and he is the murderer, responsible for sending him to the Tombs.

However, even though the narrator is ultimately responsible for Bartleby’s fate, his attitude towards the scrivener is complex, and not to be overlooked. For instance, at the very end of the novella, his stance is highly enigmatic:

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.

“Eh!—He’s asleep, aint he?”

“With kings and counsellors,” murmured I.

Indeed, the reference to the book of Job remains definitely unanswered and unexplained: “with kings and counselors of the earth, who built for themselves places now lying in ruins” (Job 3:14, King James 2000). Is Bartleby put on a mythical pedestal, along with “kings and counselors”, and thus completely opposite of the corporate world? And provided this is the case, where would he put the “late John Jacob Astor”, the Manhattan magnate?

The human dimensions of the narrator are revealed in the sense that he seems at a loss, both for ideas, and for words: “Lives without dining” is an incomplete sentence, a proof of his sincere surprise when it comes to the death of the scrivener. There again, Melville’s subtle writing proposes multiple layers of meaning: “Lives without dining” is extremely close to “lives without *dying*”, which, along with the obscure reference to Job, represents a very strong argument for a theological reading of the scrivener, very much in the line of Deleuze’s interpretation of Bartleby as a messiah.

Despite the apparent twists in the story, characterized by the appearance / disappearance of Bartleby, the scrivener himself has not seen much evolution *per se*, his attitude remains constant throughout the story. After he made his first appearance on the threshold of the office, he is rapidly secluded behind the screen door, isolated from his coworkers, which serves the same purpose as an early prison. Flavio Ceravolo, in “mirroring societies in literature: alienation, social exclusion, segregation” is a partisan of the interpretation of Bartleby as an individual, in order to comment on his evolution:

Because of his inability to react to his environment and its normal changes, he lives relying upon his few certainties which

are all confined into the physical space of the office. He lives there all the steps of the way to total alienation until the moment of his explicit expulsion from the social system when the authorities put him in jail, because of the grievances of the other inhabitants of the building. (Ceravolo 2011, 108)

However, I find this explanation unsatisfactory, because of the treatment of Bartleby not as a super being, but as a high representative of a sociological reality. For instance, I do not think Bartleby was gradually secluded from his coworkers as, precisely when he stepped on the threshold of the office, he was already a being far beyond “social” redemption. The arguable evolution was more inexorable than anything. Indeed, the analysis of the novella as a microcosm implies the study of the group and its members as a whole, and the difficulty here lies in the fact that Bartleby resists every single form of classification. Bartleby the character always has to be relegated to the rank of the “alien”, the “other”, because of his philosophical defiance. Thus, the theory Flavio Ceravolo brings into question in his article is highly interesting when it comes to apprehending the microcosm:

In Bartleby’s case, the problem could be recognized as a specific dimension of fear, closely related to the sociological organization of the concept of uncertainty. In recent debates about globalization, several sociologists (in particular Bauman and Sennett) have theorized the key role of uncertainty in determining the decline of social cohesion. The idea is that the lack of a consolidated horizon causes to individuals a sort of inability to practise effective citizenship within society. (Ceravolo 2011, 109)

This phenomenon is certainly present in the novella, and “the decline of social cohesion” is obvious, with the most notable examples as Nipper and Turkey’s reactions towards Bartleby. The particularity of the short story though is the following: this “lack of consolidated horizon” is personified by the shadowy scrivener. The concept, or absence thereof, of uncertainty is embodied by the very character of Bartleby, who stands for, as pointed out earlier, the performativity of absence. In pessimistic terms, one could even go as far as saying Bartleby is a sociological black hole, drawing human interactions to him and slowly corrupting them.

Kingsley Widmer, in “Melville’s Radical Resistance: the Method and Meaning of Bartleby” qualifies the protagonist in the following terms: “[Bartleby is] the specter of rebellious and irrational human will, whose very existence he [the narrator] denies.” (1969)

Once again, it appears that Bartleby as a being of pure “rebellion” and “irrationality” makes perfect sense; however, claiming the narrator denies Bartleby is debatable. If there is one source of

denial, I would say it is the scrivener himself, as the narrative is basically a transcript of the passage of Bartleby in the world of the narrator, therefore an attempt at a testimony of his life. Perhaps this holds true only in surface, for it is true that the narrator seems to be denying the *right to life* of Bartleby. Indeed, asked about his relation and his responsibility towards the scrivener, the lawyer answers: “‘I am very sorry, sir,’ said I, with assumed tranquility, but an inward tremor, ‘but, really, the man you allude to is nothing to me—he is no relation or apprentice of mine, that you should hold me responsible for him’” (Melville 1853, 57).

The “inward tremor” testifies for the narrator being at a loss when it comes to rationalizing the character of the scrivener, while he does indeed reject any sort of relation with Bartleby.

William Hamilton, in "Bartleby and He: The Strange Hermeneutic of Herman Melville", brings a last light regarding the reasons behind the creation of Bartleby:

Melville often started a new story at the point where the preceding one had ended. *Pierre*, just before "Bartleby," declares that "Silence is the only Voice of our God."⁴ The theme of the novel is the destruction that takes place when the other-worldly chronometrical *agape* of Pierre is inserted into the world of New York, upstate and city.

What is hinted at here is vacuity as a key concept. “Silence is the only Voice of our God” does not necessarily imply divine characteristics for Bartleby – although it very well may, depending on the interpretation – but rather hints at the creation of a system which would be *centered* around silence. The theological dimension is largely justified by Melville’s relation to religion; Richard Harter Fogle, in “Melville’s shorter tales” describes him as a “religious-minded agnostic” (1966).

Thus, Pierre revealed Melville’s intention of creating a system – be it sociological, theological or philosophical – which would revolve around silence. As pointed out, Bartleby’s divine nature has to be understood in careful terms, considering the different dimensions the term can adopt: the scrivener’s presence is indeed hardly human, and as such, is maximal, as opposed to his coworkers, and to the narrator, whose ways are extremely *human*.

4 William Hamilton explains: “*Moby-Dick* (Chapter 85) has a passage on silence throwing a forward light on both *Pierre* and *Bartleby*.”

Richard Harter Fogle also proposes two other points concerning the author of the novella which may prove of interest here:

- Melville is “a rationalist distrustful of reason”, which justifies the almost experimental turn the novella seems to take. The author tried to question reason itself, confronting it to abysses of silence: simply put, the narrator as a representative of society as a whole trying to make sense of the scrivener. It is an attempt at confronting reason itself to irrationality, of course embodied by Bartleby.
- Melville is “an indefatigable seeker uncertain of the ultimate end of his search”, which explains the uttermost uncertainty surrounding the short story. Bartleby is, after all, “a being of whom nothing is ascertainable”, despite the fact that the narrative is retrospective: the very first lines are written a long time after the events themselves occurred, and yet all the apparent rationality the narrator seems to resort to has had no effect and no result whatsoever.

Melville’s short story *Bartleby the Scrivener* is thus the tale of the “God of Silence.” The story being located in what is most certainly the center of the corporate world, Wall Street, is no surprise: the author succeeds in conferring to his protagonist the privilege of being the center of the center. The most notable change of society in the last centuries certainly is its very organization, in that the economy dictates every second of everyone’s life. As the representative of such a change, Wall Street is thus what is most modern in the world: Wall Street is modernity. Melville, in creating a character who is the complete opposite of what Wall Street stands for, yet being, in the novella, in its very center, accomplishes a feat of strength: he invented modernity within modernity. Reality is put into question every second, yet no answer has ever been found. The testimony and living proof of this tale of modernism being the very last line, where the narrator, by questioning Bartleby, questions humanity itself:

“Ah Bartleby, Ah humanity!”

Conclusion

In theatrical terms, the microcosm of the office works just like a stage. The characters enter the scene, one after the other, until the whole set is presented to the reader. Of course, the narrator enters first, as he occupies all the narrative space from the very beginning. Our aim here was to look at the novella in a sociological way, and as such, as soon as Turkey, Nipper and Ginger Nut enter the scene, the microcosm is presented and is complete. The *world* of the office is autonomous, with each of his members occupying particular roles. The authoritarian lawyer embodies top bottom hierarchy : he is the employer and the moralizing father-like figure. His three aforementioned employees, on the contrary, stand for workers in general: the working force. The domination of the narrator over them is asserted through economic as well as moral means: their wage is minimal, and they are reduced to superficial characteristics. Their human features are few, and rather than conferring a realistic tone to the story, they are comic, grotesque caricatures. Paradoxically, their number plays against them: instead of gaining power because they are more numerous, their individuality prevents them from uniting effectively together; they are class conscious, but the competitive nature of the capitalistic world is such that competition is reduced to the individual level, instead of opposing their superior in unison, they try as hard as they can to gain what little power they can for themselves. (For instance, Nipper's ambition, which, symbolically, is paralleled with his indigestions: both illnesses are corrosive, and harm him in the long run).

The character of the narrator is disingenuous. His narrative is a double standard narrative, and he is nothing he pretends to be, which contributes to giving the novella a sense of complex "reality-like" rendering. The microcosm which is thus presented is then going to be at stake when it is confronted with the arrival of Bartleby. Indeed, the scrivener's presence is going to shake the very foundations of the office. His presence, which is paradoxically characterized by absence (see performativity of absence p. 17) not only challenges the world he enters, but also the reader's own experience: Bartleby refutes reason itself. Bartleby as a force of pure paradoxicality perturbs the order of the microcosm. However his presence is more than a mere disturbance : he obsesses the narrator in that he cannot possibly understand him. The "I would prefer not to" stance, which consists in negating negation itself, is the embodiment of Bartleby's inadequacy to operate within society. Thus, Bartleby is gradually transformed into an entity which is larger than human. His silence refers to a meaning far beyond the grasp of the narrator and his human concerns. When asked on page 22:

“The time has come; you must quit this place; I am sorry for you; here is money; but you must go.”
“I would prefer not,” he replied, with his back still towards me.
“You *must*.”
He remained silent.

The clash between the two different modalities is clear: Bartleby’s neutrally neutral “I would prefer not to” completely negates the deontic modality. After the scrivener’s answer, the world as the narrator knows it loses its *raison d’être*: “He remained silent”, there is no discussion anymore, no exchange, and no life. Bartleby’s presence brings the novella to new levels of comprehension, which overthrow the understanding of the short story as a “story” of society; the term “tale”, which is part of the original subtitle, starts to take shape: Bartleby exceeds humanly expectations, to gradually reveal a nature intrinsically foreign to human kind.

As such, several readings of the place of Bartleby in the novella are possible, given the context of a sociological look. Is Bartleby an idealized champion of the people? Has Bartleby anything to do with a continuum, as his function seems to perturb directly the natural order of the narrative, considering he represents a clear *shift*? Is Bartleby the embodiment of Schopenhauer’s only choice available for man, the renunciation of life to escape the *will*? As literature itself, Bartleby resists interpretation, and retains meaning. Pretending he is elusive would be an understatement, asserting he is the void itself would be demeaning. His evident retention of information prevents the reader from knowing for sure what the scrivener’s motives are, and, as pointed out earlier, it is an undeniable part of the characteristics of Bartleby to act as an enigma.

Bartleby The Scrivener is a complex short story which forces the reader to adopt a critical eye. Meaning is everywhere, waiting behind every word, lurking around the pages, and yet it is also kept hidden: not once did Bartleby give the reader an easy way out. The very last words of the short story, uttered by the narrator: “Ah Bartleby, Ah humanity!” openly extend Bartleby to “humanity” in general, as if Bartleby were the epitome of human nature. In this sense, every person, to a certain extent, possesses a “Bartlebian” dimension, unlike Bartleby who embraces it entirely: no one is more Bartleby than Bartleby himself. And it is only reasonable to assume that making sense of such a world — our own, as opposed to Bartleby’s — requires ways far beyond our own, far beyond the ordinary; Herman Melville proposes, and especially *imposes*, in *Bartleby The Scrivener*, an alternate understanding of reality: unraveling the mysteries of the scrivener is not doable through

mere logic. The narrator, in the very last sentence of the novella, gives up his foremost ambition of comprehending the scrivener. There is no assertion when it comes to the “pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn” figure, only interpretations. Melville’s voluntary restriction of answers in *Bartleby The Scrivener* is an appeal to our most reclusive human functions, those which grant us the ability to think in terms of passion rather than reason, in terms of beauty rather than logic: in his final words, the narrator accepts Bartleby as he is, and renounces his initial corporate-like, society-imposed ambitions, forcing him to *classify* the *unclassifiable* Bartleby, and simply recognizes his role as an observer, which is “To wrestle with the angel – Art.”

In placid hours well-pleased we dream
Of many a brave unbodied scheme.
But form to lend, pulsed life create,
What unlike things must meet and mate:
A flame to melt—a wind to freeze;
Sad patience—joyous energies;
Humility—yet pride and scorn;
Instinct and study; love and hate;
Audacity—reverence. These must mate,
And fuse with Jacob’s mystic heart,
To wrestle with the angel—Art.
(Melville, 1891)

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MOTS-CLÉS : *Bartleby le Scribe*, Melville, sociologique, microcosme

RÉSUMÉ

Mémoire sur *Bartleby le Scribe*, de Melville, publié en 1853. L'analyse vise à appréhender la nouvelle en termes sociologiques. La dynamique du microcosme social du bureau du narrateur est ainsi décrite, afin de comprendre l'ensemble des conséquences de l'arrivée de Bartleby, le scribe récemment employé par le narrateur. L'idée développée est le fait que le bureau de l'homme de loi représente la société en général, en ce qu'il suit une organisation hiérarchique industrielle. Par la suite la société présentée dans la nouvelle va se voir profondément perturbée par la nature particulière du scribe. Un retour à la normale s'opère sûrement à la mort de Bartleby, mais le bureau a été indéniablement affecté par sa présence. Ce personnage énigmatique laisse chaque génération de lecteurs dans le doute, car ses intentions, ainsi que sa nature elle-même, restent indéchiffrables.

KEYWORDS : *Bartleby The Scrivener*, Melville, sociological, microcosm

ABSTRACT

Masters thesis on *Bartleby The Scrivener* by Melville, published in 1853. The analysis aims at understanding the short story in sociological terms. The dynamic of the microcosm within the office is thus described, in order to understand the extent of the consequences of the arrival of Bartleby, the scrivener newly hired by the narrator. The idea which is developed is the fact that the office stands for society in general, adopting a typical industrial hierarchical organization. Then, the society of the novella as it is presented is going to be shaken by the inner peculiarity of the scrivener. It arguably goes back to normal upon the death of Bartleby, but the office has undoubtedly been stained by the presence of the scrivener. This enigmatic character leaves every generation of readers in the shadow when it comes to his inner motives.

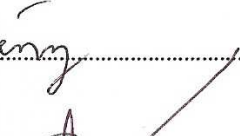
“Le rat de bibliothèque”, de Carl Spitzweg, 1850



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