Reflections on Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street”

Dr. Robert Zaslavsky

“Bartleby”\(^1\) is one of Melville’s most perplexing works, verging on unintelligibility. Despite its ostensible unintelligibility, it is a compelling story to read. When one reads it—however much or little of it one actually may understand—one feels that it has an elusive core of deep and coherent meaning. That feeling impels one to return to the story again and again in a quest to pierce through to its inner teaching.

Although a diversity of critics has wrestled with the tale, no one seems to have been able to grasp the tale as a whole in its integrity of meaning. In a sense, the tale itself resists the very attempt to understand it. Indeed, the tale is very densely written. In that sense, one can see, or begin to see, how fused are the story’s form and content: the story itself is a wall of “amazing thickness” (NN 44) that induces in the reader a kind of “dead-wall revery” (NN 31; cf. 29, 31, 37, 43, 44), a kind of metaphysical perplexity and wondering. One possible guide out of this puzzlement is a “prudence” and “method” analogous to that which the lawyer-narrator possesses (cf. NN 14, 29, 31, 36).

One prudentially methodical framework that is useful for understanding the tale is rooted in the seriousness with which the nineteenth-century American writers treated democracy. As Ralph Ellison has suggested, whatever else the great American works of the nineteenth-century “were ‘about’ they also managed to be about democracy.”\(^2\)

Therefore, any reflection on one of these works must begin with a reflection on the nature of democracy. Such a reflection should begin with the one statement that is most representative of the essence of American democracy, namely the statement that “all

---

\(^1\) I have posted the full text of the story/novella on the Downloads page of my web site (www.doczonline.com). For convenience, I have included bracketed within it the pagination of the Northwestern-Newberry [= NN] Edition text from The Piazza Tales and other prose pieces 1839-1860 (Evanston and Chicago, 1987), volume nine of its The Writings of Herman Melville. However, in one crucial passage, NN 43-44, I take issue with the editorial decision to disregard what I consider to be a crucial revision by Melville, a revision that the editors reject on what even they consider less than unassailable grounds. See their note to 44.4-5 (NN 579). It is essential to the meaning of the story that the grub man be lacking a name, even an obvious nickname (Mr. Cutlets), as the discussion below should justify.

\(^2\) Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act (NY, 1964), pages 40-41 (within the essay “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity”).
men are created equal.” In the nineteenth-century, this principle was taken most seriously by American political thinkers. With this statement, the Founders attempted to legislate both absolute equality and the notion of unlimited possibilities for all humans. In this way, an ideal was put forth. However, it was not altogether clear how to realize or actualize that ideal, how to put it into practice.

To the deeply democratic, acutely morally conscious writers of nineteenth-century America, it became painfully clear that a perhaps necessary, perhaps ineradicable, tension had arisen between the ideal and the action. That tension had to do with the two aspects or dimensions of the democratic ideal: the humanistic dimension and the individualistic dimension.³

On the one hand, ours is a society in which each member absolutely and voluntarily must submerge his or her individuality into a unified whole. However, this submersion of individuality involves no loss of human dignity: it is zealously humanistic. In this society, in principle, persons are neither equally slaves nor equally masters, but they are equally human. As Melville put it in a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne (1? June 1851):

> So, when you see or hear of my ruthless democracy on all sides, you may possibly feel a touch of a shrink, or something of that sort. It is but nature to be shy of a mortal who boldly declares that a thief in jail is as honorable a personage as Gen. George Washington. This is ludicrous. But Truth is the silliest thing under the sun.⁴

In other words, there is in this society a tremendous leveling of all humans.

On the other hand, at the same time, ours is a society that regards itself as radically self-sufficient. This self-sufficiency is mirrored in each of its citizens. It is an island, each

---

³ I adapt this distinction from remarks that Ralph Ellison made about Mark Twain’s Huck Finn: “Huck’s relationship to Jim, the river, and all they symbolize, is that of a humanist; in his relation to the community he is an individualist. He embodies the two major conflicting drives operating in nineteenth-century America. And if humanism is man’s basic attitude toward a social order which he accepts, and individualism his basic attitude toward one he rejects, one might say that Twain, by allowing those two attitudes to argue dialectically in his work of art, was as highly moral an artist as he was a believer in democracy, and vice versa.” (Ellison, op cit, pages 33-34)

of whose inhabitants is an island unto himself or herself alone, an “isolato.” In other words, ours is a society that promotes radical individualism.

These two dimensions, humanism and individualism, are the compass points between which our society moves, not always successfully.

It is possible to schematize this framework in a chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HUMANISM</th>
<th>INDIVIDUALISM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>homogeneity</td>
<td>heterogeneity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sameness of all things</td>
<td>uniqueness of each thing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the one/the All</td>
<td>the many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transcendentalism</td>
<td>pragmatism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(the oversoul)</td>
<td>(what works for you is what is true for you)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nature is fundamentally good</td>
<td>nature is fundamentally bad (or hostile or indifferent to humans or chaotic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dimness of vision/blindness</td>
<td>clarity of vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>death, the great leveler (submersion into the whole)</td>
<td>birth, the cry of individuality (assertion of oneself)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mercy</td>
<td>justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christianity (New Testament)</td>
<td>Judaism (Old Testament)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>federalism</td>
<td>state’s rights</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Life in our society moves back and forth between these two dimensions or aspects.

---

5 Cf. Melville, *Moby Dick*, Chapter 27, end: “They were nearly all Islanders in the Pequod, *Isolatoes* too, I call such . . . each *Isolato* living on a separate continent of his own. Yet now, federated along one keel, what a set these Isolatoes were!”
This problem of the relationship between, the tension between, humanism and individualism is central to the meaning of “Bartleby.” This is signaled most graphically by the fact that the first word of the story is “I” and the last word is “humanity.”

The law office is a microcosm, the society writ small. In addition, in its way, it is a democratic society. This emerges especially in connection with the names of those in the law office. The narrator asserts with reference to the names Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut that “they were nicknames mutually conferred upon each other by my three clerks” (NN 15). Such a naming procedure reflects a democratically decided covenant or contract. In the society of the law office, the employee-citizens work together to produce and preserve the legal documents that are their central concern. In this society, there is enormous tolerance for individual differences.

Into this society, whose governor is nameless and whose citizens have only nicknames, comes Bartleby, the only person with an apparently genuine name. The unnamed narrator and the named Bartleby, then, are the bookends between which the others stand.

Since the narrator is unnamed and Bartleby is named, one spontaneously might expect that the narrator represents anonymous humanity (or humanism) and that Bartleby represents unique particularity (or individualism). However, in actuality—and this is Melville’s subtlety and skill—it is precisely the opposite: the unnamed narrator is the person who is most fully and individually detailed, while the named Bartleby is a person of mystery about whom one can say very little, about whom there seems to be no individualizing description. That is, one can make many positive statements about who and what the narrator is, but the primary statements that one can make about Bartleby are negative, are about who and what he is not. Therefore, the unnamed lawyer-narrator embodies pragmatic individualism, while Bartleby embodies transcendental humanism. Even more perplexing—and contrary to what one would expect—in one’s experience and memory of the story, the well-defined individual stands out less sharply than the non-descript and virtually invisible humanist.

In addition, Bartleby stretches across all individual differences. For example, although Turkey works well only in the morning and Nippers only in the afternoon, initially Bartleby works well both in the morning and in the afternoon; although Turkey works very poorly in the afternoon and Nippers works very poorly in the morning,
finally Bartleby prefers not to work either in the afternoon or in the morning. In addition, although all the major persons have fairly specific ages, Bartleby’s age is indeterminate. Is he middle-aged? One does not know for certain. One knows only that he is younger than the narrator.

Therefore, Bartleby is undifferentiated and indeterminate, bare humanness, pure humanism.

The major embodiment of humanism in the story is wallness. The phrase “dead-wall” occurs repeatedly in the story. What is a “dead wall”? It is a wall that is “unbroken, unrelieved by breaks or interruptions, absolutely uniform and continuous” (OED). Indeed, Bartleby constantly indulges in dead wall reveries [cf. NN 26, 29, 31, 33, 37 (bis), 43, 44, 44-45].

This is reinforced by the setting of the story, namely—as the subtitle indicates—Wall Street. Not only is Wall Street the literally geographical Wall Street, but also it is emphatically a walled street, a walled world, just as the lawyer-narrator’s office is a completely walled enclosure into which no direct sunlight penetrated. Every window in the office looks out on a wall, although Bartleby’s window is the closest to one. Bartleby’s window is only three feet away from a wall (NN 19), but the walls at the other windows are farther away. In addition, the office has internal walls: the ground glass door that separates Bartleby and the lawyer from the other employees and the green screen that separates the lawyer from Bartleby (NN 19). For the lawyer, these internal walls are protectors of his privacy and individuality insofar as they remain closed, and they are symbols of his mastery insofar as they open and close at his will.

However, for Bartleby, the world is a wall, a wall street. This may explain why Bartleby initially seems to have only one eye (NN 20-21), i.e., he lacks three-dimensional vision, and he can see only two-dimensionally, flatly. It further may explain the basis for the narrator’s conjecture that Bartleby’s vision is dim: as the embodiment of humanism, Bartleby does not see things very clearly, but instead he sees things only in the mass, very dimly. Therefore, dimness of vision is associated with humanism, while clarity of vision is associated with individualism. Dimness of vision is wall vision.

As the story proceeds, Bartleby gradually is drawn to walls and wallness until finally he becomes so assimilated to them that he becomes, in effect, a wall himself. He

---

6 For a diagram of the office, see the Appendix.
is like the narrator’s plaster of Paris bust of Cicero (NN 21, 30), and he is like a lifeless monument (NN 33; cf. 27-28).\textsuperscript{7}

Bartleby’s major statement before he is taken to the Tombs—and he repeats it a number of times—is, “I am not particular” (NN 41). As a casual utterance, this means, “it does not matter to me.” However, a subterranean meaning is “I am not a particular being, not an individual.” Indeed, Bartleby precisely is not an individual, but rather he is the representative of our “common humanity” insofar as we are all “sons of Adam,” something that the narrator gradually comes to realize (NN 28, 26).

In addition, Bartleby is taken to the Tombs at noon (NN 42), i.e., neither in the morning nor in the afternoon.

Furthermore, throughout the story, Bartleby is associated with death-like paleness and with death itself. Of course, death is the great humanizer, because through and in death, all humans come to be equal.

Finally, Bartleby’s death itself is an embodiment of his merely/purely human status, because he dies in the foetal position. Therefore, in one act, Bartleby unites the prenatal and the post mortem. In other words, Bartleby’s body at the end represents the whole cycle of a human lifetime from birth through death. This suggests that human life, the merely human, is essentially defined by its boundaries, the womb and the tomb. In this way, the end of Bartleby is manifestly emblematic. Its emblematic character is emphasized in a variety of ways.

First, the walls that surround the yard in the Tombs establish a continuity between the world of the prison and the world outside the prison. Both worlds are totally walled enclosures.

Second, the narrator refers to the “Egyptian character of the masonry” and likens the Tombs to “the eternal pyramids” (NN 44) —and pyramids were also tombs. When he refers in this way to the origin of civilization, he generalizes the meaning of the story to include all times and all places, all humanity. This all-encompassing universalization is reinforced by the reference to the “kings and counselors” (NN 45) of the book of Job, a reference that points to the fundamental equality of humanism that is at the heart of

\textsuperscript{7} Cf. Petra, NN 27.
Bartleby: in death, the humblest of humans is on the same level as the mightiest of the earth.  

Third, the grass growing in the prison yard points to the eternity of the life cycle, to death as part of the life cycle, to death as even an agent of the life cycle. In this connection, there is a beautiful illustrative passage from Melville’s Pierre:

For indeed the democratic element operates as a subtile acid among us; forever producing new things by corroding the old; as in the south of France verdigris, the primitive material of one kind of green paint, is produced by grape-vinegar poured upon copper plates. Now in general nothing can be more significant of decay than the idea of corrosion; yet on the other hand, nothing can more vividly suggest luxuriance of life, than the idea of green as a color; for green is the peculiar signet of all-fertile Nature herself. Herein by apt analogy we behold the marked anomalousness of America; whose character abroad, we need not be surprised, is misconceived, when we consider how strangely she contradicts all prior notions of human things; and how wonderfully to her, Death itself becomes transmuted into Life. So that political institutions, which in other lands seem above all things intensely artificial, with America seem to possess the divine virtue of a natural law; for the most mighty of Nature’s laws is this, that out of Death she brings Life.  

The grass growing in Bartleby’s prison yard is green the color of which is emblematic of the fertility of nature and life. One should recall that the folding screen around Bartleby’s desk in the lawyer’s office was also green. Therefore, even from very early in

---

8 One might add that these references point to a theological echo sounded by the duality of individualism and humanism. On the one hand, there is an echo of Judaism, whose Bible presents a religion that is parochial (chosen and separated from the rest), paternalistic, and fiercely individualistic. In this echo, the narrator is a kind of Jehovah figure and Bartleby is the Adam who is ultimately thrust out of the Eden of the lawyer’s office. On the other hand, there is in the story an echo of Christianity, whose Bible presents a religion that is universalistic, a religion in which all humans are siblings, a religion that is passive and humanistic. In this echo, Bartleby can be seen as a kind of Christ, taking on the burden of humanity and destined to die for the benefit of that humanity. To explore this would take us too far afield.

9 Herman Melville, Pierre; or, the Ambiguities (Northwestern-Newberry Edition, 1971), page 9. This is volume seven of the Northwestern-Newberry The Writings of Herman Melville.
the story, there has been an association between Bartleby and the life cycle. The notion that out of death comes life applies not only to nature as a whole, but also to each natural being, to each person: each life is a series of deaths and rebirths.

In America especially, this life cycle impresses itself upon us with a clarity and a bareness that it cannot do elsewhere, because elsewhere it is glossed over and covered over by a texture of artificiality. The greenness of the grass emerging from the ground is one of the essential images of American literature. Indeed, what some would call the greatest book of nineteenth-century American poetry was titled *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman, in which the grass en masse represents the humanism of the American experience, as each blade (leaf) represents the individualism.10

In “Bartleby,” just as Bartleby dies in a tomb out of which the green grass emerges, so too does the narrator die as the legal person that he was to become transmuted into a literary person whose identification with Bartleby enables him to write the story that we read. This story is a letter, as it were, to us the readers: it is an epistle presenting the gospel of Bartleby’s career. This letter, this epistle, this book, is composed of pages. Another word for “pages” is “leaves.” This story, then, is the narrator’s leaves of grass in the form of a symbolic letter to humanity.

Hopefully, this letter will reach its destination, will reach us with its message. However, it may not reach us. Perhaps it too will end up in the Dead Letter Office, consigned to the flames.

Perhaps all of us have the same fate in store for us:

Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? (NN 45)

It all depends on how we read the “Ah” in the last line of the story.

---

10 The same duality is represented in the “We the People” of the Constitution: the “people” (a singular noun whose plural is “peoples”) is the humanistic totality, the unum, which gathers together the individualistic grouping that is signified by the “we.”
Appendix: The Lawyer-Narrator’s Office

skylight shaft

white wall

window

bust of Cicero

lawyer-narrator

folding green screen

Bartleby window

3’ wall

ground glass

folding-doors

other workers (Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut)

window

black wall