

“Analysis of Alienation, Writing, and Labor in ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’”

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Abstract

Alienation as an important literary theme is represented almost in its totality and complexity in Melville's short story "Bartleby the Scrivener". Through this story Melville tries to give us a clear understanding of Man's alienated nature and condition in modern society. The story also turns out to be an allegorical representation of Melville's alienation from his society, his profession as a writer and himself as a man.

Keywords: Alienation, Capitalism, Labor, Originality, Reification

In modern terms alienation has been used by philosophers, psychologists and sociologists to refer to an extraordinary variety of psycho-social disorders, including loss of self, anxiety state, depersonalization, loneliness, isolation, pessimism and the loss of beliefs and values. Among the social groups who have been described as alienated in varying degree are women, industrial workers, migrant workers, the aged, the young generation as a whole, consumers, the audience of mass media, and political radicals (Josephson, 1968, p.12). As it is clear from this list, we are dealing with a word that lends itself to many different meanings, and to deal with all of these meanings would need an encyclopedia. Thus to limit our discussion, it is tried to deal with the concept of alienation as related to literature; mainly as viewed by Existentialist thinkers and writers, psychologists such as Erich Fromm, and then in a much more complete and thorough analysis, to analyze it from Marxist point of view.

To begin with, Psychology has a great deal to say, regarding the problem of alienation. Karen Horney, for example, describes alienation as "the remoteness of the neurotic from his own feelings, wishes, beliefs, and energies. It is the loss of the feeling of being an active, determining force in his own life (Josephson, 1968, p.16).

The short-coming in Horney's argument, is that it does not explain how exactly all these changes in human feelings and psychic state happen. Is there any social and historical cause for this psychological phenomenon? Does this psychological fact influence society and if so, how? More importantly, this kind of explanation fails to account for any practical way out of this condition or to prevent it to happen (Josephson, 1968, p.19). The alienated man, who is remote from his own feelings and actions, feels lost and confused. He is in desperate search for an identity that he cannot find. Unable to know and understand himself or others, he asks "who am I?" What this means in a modern society (which is again left unanswered by Horney) is suggested by Erich Fromm in his famous book *The Sane Society*. Central to his discussion is the theme of man's alienation, which Fromm considers as one of the major psychological effects of capitalism. In a capitalist society, he believes, man does not experience himself as the active and powerful agent but as an impoverished thing depended upon the powers outside himself. Fromm considers the condition of a worker in modern industrial society as follows:

In industry the person becomes an economic atom that dances to the tune of atomistic management.... Work is becoming more repetitive and thoughtless as the planners, the micromotionists, and the scientific managers further strip the worker of his right to think and move freely. Life is being denied; need to control, creativeness, curiosity, and independent thought are being bulked, and the result, the inevitable result, is flight or fight on the part of the worker, apathy or destructiveness, psychic regression (Fromm, 1990, p.120).

Although Fromm explains the condition of workers in society as an example of alienation and its results we should not get into thinking that this is only the fate facing workers, but rather that this is the common fate awaiting all the members of such a society, including managers, industrial owners, politicians, etc. Yet, as was mentioned before, the definitions given so far, although valuable, are not quite satisfactory. This is mostly due to the fact that they believe the roots of alienation to be psychological and in this way they miss the social and historical influences and forces that cause alienation to be the dominant condition in modern industrial societies. On the contrary, Marxism, by looking at alienation as a socio-historical phenomenon seems to be able to provide far better answers. But before moving on to Marxism, let's briefly discuss what Existentialists think of alienation since it would prove helpful in the discussion and would guide us to a better understanding of Melville and his story.

Existentialism represents a challenge to the idea of "knowability of the world." It regards the material or outside world as "absurd." Existentialism teaches us that alienation is rooted in the nature of man as an "enigmatic cast away" on this world. This awareness of the meaninglessness of the world causes the individual to try in different

attempts to overcome that state, but he cannot find any exit from this situation and from his preplanned fate. This is a widespread tendency, among many thinkers and writers, especially in the philosophy of man of letters like Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. They tend to view a human being as an isolated existent who is “cast” into an alien universe, conceive universe as having no meaning, inherent truth or value, and to represent human life as an existence which is absurd as well as “anguished.” Each individual comes from a nothingness and moves through his life towards the inevitable nothingness that awaits him at the end; the death (Finkelstein, 1967). The alienated man “feels as everyman and no man, drifting in a world that has little meaning for him and over which he experiences no power” (Josephson, 1968, p.11). He feels as a stranger from himself and from others. As Camus says in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942):

In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile.... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity. Unlike Existentialism, Marxism does not believe in the eternity of alienation. Marxism, of course does agree with Existentialism on one point: the tormenting forms of alienation suffered by men and women today influence different aspects of their lives (qtd. in Abrams, 1993, P. 1).

The method of explanation offered by Marxism for this condition is however opposed to that of Existentialism. For Marxism, alienation results from man’s feeling of powerlessness against the forces of nature and of society and his ignorance of the laws which govern their operation. The causes of existing alienation are rooted in Capitalism. Capitalism is itself rooted in the dispossession of the working masses from the means of production and this condition consequently causes the alienation of wage labor. In the further course of its development, this system reproduces the conditions of alienation. How all these takes place is dealt with by Karl Marx himself. According to Marx a major stage of the alienation of the labor happened when part of the society which no longer had access to the means of production and means of subsistence, was forced to sell its labor power on the market in order to survive. This is one of the main characteristics of alienated labor. What does it mean to sell your labor to another person (your boss)? In Marx’s analysis this purely formal and legal contract and relation (selling your labor and part of your time to another person for money to live on) is not as simple and innocent as it seems. There is in reality something behind this process which has deep influence on the life of the wage laborer. It first of all implies that you lose control over a large part of your working hours. All the time which you have sold to the employer belongs to him, not to you. You are not free to do what you want at work. It is the employer who dictates that what you will and what you will not do during this whole time. He will dictate what you produce, how you produce it, and where you produce it. He will be, in a word, master over your activity.

Alienation thereupon acquires another form. When a wage earner has sold his labor power for a certain part of his life to an employer, the products of his labor are not his own. The products of his labor become the property of the employer. This is when we come to the final form of alienation which results from the points previously mentioned. And this is the way Marx saw it; the worker having lost control over both the condition of his labor and the product of his labor, now becomes alienated from himself.

The alienation of the worker from his labor means that something basic has changed in his life. But what is it? It could be said that (as Marx also believed) everybody enjoys some creative capacity, certain talents or potentialities in him which should be expressed in his labor activity. However, when wage labor is the dominant condition, work is no longer a means of self expression for anybody who sells his labor. Work is just a means to attain a goal. And that goal is to get money; some income to be able to buy the goods necessary to satisfy ones needs. In this way a basic concept of human nature, the capacity to perform creative work, is repressed and distorted. Work becomes something which is not creative and productive for human beings, but something which is harmful and destructive (Novack and Mandel, 1970). As Marx argues, “the capitalist division of labor destroyed an earlier phase of human history in which artistic and spiritual life were inseparable from the process of material existence, and craftsmen still worked with a sense of beauty.... The separation of mental and manual work dissolved the organic unity of spiritual and material activities, with the result that masses were forced to produce commodities without the joy of creative engagement in their work” (Selden et al. 1997, p.92). An industrial worker cannot make any contact with the thing produced and has no sense, whatsoever, towards it. He just performs a repetitive job, with a feeling of boredom and nullity.

In Marx’s analysis of capitalism, the objects manufactured are called “commodities.” They do not express the life process and capacities of individual laborers who used their labor power to produce these commodities. The key factor in the alienation of man from the commodities is the separation of the subject from the objects which are made “through” him and not by him. We can relate this to Vico’s principle which stated that one can only be said to have the knowledge of those things which he has produced himself. Capitalism, as we saw, is a system that constantly destroys the individual’s sense of himself as a person ordering, shaping and making the world he lives in. Finally we come to a very important aspect of alienation: alienation of man from one of his most fundamental

features; the tendency to transform relations between human beings into relations between things. This is that famous tendency towards “Reification”; the transformation of social relations into things, into objects, of which Marx speaks in *Capital*. Reification means that society satisfies all its needs in terms of commodity exchange. Reification is present in all the social relations of capitalism and so is the dominant reality for a person living in a capitalist society. It is the process in which people conceive of themselves as objects (Novack and Mandel, 1970). This way of looking is an outcome of alienation and many examples can be cited to clarify it. A good case can be that of waiters and waitresses in restaurants. They are working people who are the victim and not responsible for the process of reification. They are even unaware of the nature of their involvement in this phenomenon. While they are under heavy pressure to serve the maximum number of customers on the job imposed upon them by the system and its owners, they look upon the costumers solely under the form of the orders they put in. Once, it was observed that, a waitress address herself to a person by saying “ah, you are the corned beef and the cabbage.” You are not say, Mr. or Mrs. Brown. Not a person of a certain age with certain personality, you are “corned beef and cabbage”, because the waitress has on her mind the orders taken under stress from so many people (Poppenheim, 1959, p.26). As seen, reification results from a certain type of human relations rooted in commodity production and its extreme division of labor where people engaged in one trade see their fellows only as customers or in terms of whatever economic relation they have with them. This is a rather detailed analysis of alienation and how it is seen by critics and philosophers. Now it would be necessary to have a brief sketch of the story and characters so that it would assist us in the better analysis of the story.

An unnamed Wall Street lawyer whose business is property law narrates “Bartleby.” The lawyer’s tale, subtitled “A Story of Wall Street,” provides a sketch of Bartleby, “one of the strangest [scriveners] I ever saw, or heard of” (Melville, 1996, p.13). The lawyer concedes that little is known of Bartleby’s life, other than the brief portion of it witnessed in the tale; the overall mood of the unknown and uncertainty overshadows the story. “Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from original sources and in his case, those are very few” (Melville, 1996, p.13).

The narrator—generally referred to as “the lawyer”—begins by detailing what is known, namely, his own personality and those of his other employees. The lawyer reveals himself as a leisurely, unambitious, “eminently safe” man who never goes to trial court but does “a snug business among rich men’s bonds, and mortgages, and title-deeds” (Melville, 1996, p.14).

Before hiring Bartleby, the lawyer had three employees, known only by their almost Dickensian nicknames—Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut—who are oddly eccentric. Turkey, a shabbily dressed Englishman about sixty years old, is a perfect copyist in the morning but makes many mistakes in the after noon; the lawyer suspects that Turkey drinks during his lunch hour. Nippers is well dressed and though “whiskered, sallow, and, upon the whole, a rather piratical-looking young man” (Melville, 1996, p.16), is greatly distressed with ambition and indigestion. Despite being a capable scrivener, his ambition leads him to overstep his bounds. He frequently wants to draft original legal documents, which only a lawyer is qualified to do, rather than merely copy them. His indigestion, usually experienced after breakfast, makes Nippers ill tempered, and he grinds his teeth and utters maledictions throughout the morning. Fortunately for the lawyer, an afternoon transformation in Nippers compensates for Turkey’s midday decline. Just when Turkey becomes less reliable, Nippers’ indigestion (and consequent irritability) wears off, and Nippers becomes an excellent copyist. As the lawyer says: “Their fits relieved each other, like guards” (Melville, 1996, p.18). Ginger Nut was not a scrivener but a twelve-year-old boy, whose father, a cart driver, sent him to the lawyer to apprentice in hopes of “seeing his son on the bench instead of a cart” (Melville, 1996, p.18). Ginger Nut was named for the little cakes that Turkey and Nippers sent him off to buy throughout the day. Thus, the lawyer portrays his odd but effective office.

The lawyer’s recent political appointment as master in chancery dramatically increases his “original business—that of a conveyance and title hunter, and drawer-up of recondite documents of all sorts” (Melville, 1996:p.19)—and requires him to hire another clerk. Bartleby at first seems too normal to be cast among the office eccentrics, but as the story moves forward, events take a different path. The lawyer, happy to find such calm, sedate person who might “operate beneficially on the flighty temper of Turkey, and the fiery one of Nippers” (Melville, 1996, p.19), decides to keep Bartleby close by, assigning him a desk in his own office by a window with no view. Bartleby seems a model scrivener, doing “an extraordinary quantity of writing,” but he does his job “silently, palely, mechanically” (Melville, 1996, p.20). Often a scrivener must check the accuracy of the duplicates, a task called “reading the copies,” which is accomplished by having two or more people read the copy aloud, word for word, while another reads the original. It is a dull task, the lawyer concedes, one “that mettlesome poet, Byron” certainly would not wish to do. The first time the lawyer asks Bartleby to examine a copy with him, Bartleby responds with the famous phrase for which the character and story are best known: “I would prefer not to” (Melville, 1996, p.20). This phrase is repeated, in response to similar requests, twenty-two times in the story.

The lawyer notes with curiosity and consternation that Bartleby never seems to leave the office, apparently, surviving on Ginger Nut's pastries. The lawyer later learns that Bartleby is living at the office, as he is discovered there on a Sunday morning. The lawyer feels "stinging melancholy" (Melville, 1996, p.28) when he thinks of Bartleby's utter friendlessness and loneliness, and he concludes that Bartleby must be afflicted with some spiritual or mental illness. The lawyer asks Bartleby about his past, but Bartleby "prefers not to" tell him anything. After preferring not to verify the copies on several occasions, Bartleby eventually stops writing altogether.

Whereas he had earlier tolerated Bartleby's peculiar refusals, appreciating his exceptional productivity, the lawyer can no longer suffer this inexplicable behavior; as delicately and considerately as possible, he fires Bartleby. Bartleby, however, prefers not to leave, and for several days the lawyer is distracted by his perplexing trespasser. Finally, the lawyer moves his offices, leaving Bartleby behind. The lawyer later learns from the space's new tenant that Bartleby remains immovable, preferring not to leave the place. After having Bartleby physically removed from the office, the tenant finds him lingering in the building, along the banister or in the doorway. The lawyer offers to help Bartleby find lodging and a job, but Bartleby "would prefer not to make any change at all" (Melville, 1996, p.41). Finally, he is arrested as a vagrant and consigned to the Tombs, New York City's jail. Preferring not to eat, Bartleby dies a few days later. In a brief epilogue, the lawyer hears a rumor that Bartleby had previously worked for the postal service in the Dead Letter Office; the lawyer concludes that handling letters intended for dead recipients must have had a profoundly harmful effect on Bartleby, eating away his will to live. In the tale's final line, the lawyer extends his surmises about his strange former scrivener to the human race: "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" (Melville, 1996, p.45).

The tale of Bartleby affords multiple points of entry for a discussion of alienation in literature since all the views discussed earlier about alienation and its roots are evident in the story. Bartleby is alienated from society in many ways, and the story's final line suggests the degree to which such alienation is part of the human condition. Leo Marx, in "Melville's Parable of the Walls," famously argues that "Bartleby" is an allegory of the role of the literary writer in a society that seems to have no place for his art. Marx notes that Melville by 1853 had experienced only limited success with *Moby-Dick* and had suffered a critical and financial disaster with his latest book, *Pierre*, just before writing "Bartleby." In Marx's view, the tale expresses Melville's bleak view of the social condition of the writer in America, and the alienation of Bartleby is an apt depiction of the writer's estrangement from other people. The numerous "walls" in this "Story of Wall Street" underscore the isolation of Bartleby, or the writer, from other people. Bartleby sits in the lawyer's office at a desk near a window with no view; because of a subsequently erected building, this second-floor window opens to a blank brick wall. Even inside the office, the lawyer has walled Bartleby off with a partition, "a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not from my voice" (Melville, 1996, p.19). Even before voicing his preference not to read the copies, Bartleby is physically and, by extension, emotionally isolated from those around him. After he stops working, Bartleby spends his days staring at the blank wall. This can be said to be a clear indication of the dehumanizing pressures and setting that Bartleby (as a representative of human race) feels and lives in. The existentialist philosophy is clearly at work here. By looking at the blank wall, Bartleby exemplifies the absurdity and uselessness of all human actions. Through the ending line of the story Melville emphasizes the idea by comparing Bartleby and humanity. That Bartleby refuses to leave the office even when he is fired, or even when the lawyer moves his office to a new place and another tenant moves in, has a symbolic significance in the story. The office where he works and lives represents the world and his refusal to leave it. It is probably the singe of man's doomed fate. Like Bartleby, man is bored, confused and frustrated by life in this world; yet he has nowhere else to go and is doomed to live and die here.

For Leo Marx, Bartleby's condition is analogous to Melville's own in a society that does not value his creative, *original* writing. Melville's refusals to write, or preference not to write, the sorts of books that the public desired led to a refusal to copy or imitate popular forms of fiction. In two letters, Melville indicates his frustration with his life as a writer. In an 1849 note to his father-in-law, he refers to his recently completed *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, the two books written just before *Moby-Dick*:

No reputation that is gratifying to me can possibly be achieved by either of these books. They are two *jobs*, which I have done for the money—being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood. [. . .] Being books, then, written in this way, my only desire for their "success" (as it is called) springs from my pocket, & not from my heart. So far as I am individually concerned, & independent of my pocket, it is my earnest desire to write those sorts of books which are said to "fail" (Hayford et al, 1996, pp.138-39).

Then, in a famous letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1851, as he was completing *Moby-Dick*, Melville wrote, "Dollars damn me. [. . .] What I feel most moved to write, that is banned—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches" (Hayford et al, 1996, p. 191). The relative failure of *Moby-Dick* and the absolute failure of *Pierre* led Melville to magazine writing as a way to earn a

living, and “Bartleby, the Scrivener” is the first story he published, in 1853. The allegorical Bartleby represents Melville’s “deep hopelessness” as a writer of literary fiction, and Bartleby’s silence reflects the alienation of Melville and of the literary artist in general (Marx, 1952, p.602). The alienation of the writer cuts both ways: The artist is estranged from his fellow man by being unpopular, and artists estrange themselves from society by writing works that cannot be easily digested by the masses. Melville is not merely being ironic or elitist when he says he wishes to write works that “fail”; he is also acknowledging his position as an outsider. The case is clear, either one has to lose his individuality and identity and be rewarded with a place in the society; though not as a man but as a non-entity, or he has to save his individuality and be forced out of society.

For Melville and for Bartleby, writing is depended to a marketplace, and the alienation experienced is, in part at least, a form of alienation caused by the capitalist mode of production. The market has little use for original writing but rewards familiar or derivative work—copies—that Melville cannot bring himself to produce. Bartleby, who begins as a prolific copyist, nevertheless would “prefer not to” read those copies. Eventually, he would “prefer not to” write anymore, and by the end he would “prefer not to” do anything. As James C. Wilson notes, “With his ‘dead wall’ reveries, Bartleby provides a classic example of alienated man... [with a probability that] his alienation results from the dehumanizing experience of Wall Street, from the prison of his socioeconomic system” (Wilson, 1981, p.338). From a sociological perspective, Bartleby is alienated from society by the economic forces that separate people as individuals. Even the name of characters in this story indicates absence of real human relations between them. Reification of people and their connections with each other is the outcome of the capitalist system they live in. Characters do not enjoy full and proper names, names that would indicate their individuality. Ginger nut is called by that name just because he is the provider of food for the office workers and he is important as far as he accomplishes his task. His individuality and personality is left unnoticed because what matters is the kind of economic relation he has with the other members of society. In fact he is turned into an object with certain economic value. That is why to others he is Ginger Nut and not a human. This is the case with Turkey, Nippers and Bartleby too. Bartleby is always known as Bartleby, the scrivener. “Scrivener” has become a name or a title that defines him and makes a sense of him for others. It is as if without this he can not be realized.

Marxist critics have viewed Bartleby as revolutionary in his refusal to work or as tragic in becoming an obsolete commodity. For example, Louise Barnett has called Bartleby a “victim of and protest against the numbing world of capitalistic profit and alienated labor” (Barnett, 1974, p. 379). His alienation represents the alienation of all workers in a system that regards their labor as merely one more commodity among many other commodities that can be traded in the marketplace.

Yet matters are not that simple and straight forward as they appear. The careful language is important for understanding Bartleby’s alienation. Gilles Deleuze has shown that the phrase Bartleby uses is quite distinct from an outright refusal. The formula, “I prefer not to”, excludes all alternatives, and “devours what it claims to conserve no less than it distances itself from everything else.... This is what the attorney glimpses with dread: all his hopes of bringing Bartleby back to reason are dashed because they rest on a *logic of presuppositions* according to which an employer “expects” to be obeyed, or a kind friend listened to, whereas Bartleby has invented a new logic, a *logic of preference*, which is enough to undermine the presuppositions of language as a whole” (Deleuze, 1997, p.73).

This is key to understanding the distinction between Bartleby’s “preference” and a “refusal” and also to understanding Bartleby’s intense alienation. He is not a rebel fighting an obtuse, commercial, unpoetic society. Contrary to Leo Marx’s claim that Bartleby embodies Melville’s refusal as a writer to produce bad literature for a society that will not accept good literature, Bartleby is even more of an outsider than the *rebellious poet* celebrated by artists and critics from Charles Baudelaire onward. Bartleby is completely outside the system of language itself. Language, as Lacan states, is a system utilized and entered by man early in his life to establish and represent his “self” and his sense of individuality and identity. By mastering language, man starts an attempt to represent his “self”, give meaning to his surrounding world and finally to gain control over it. But ironically the same act of language acquisition gives rise to his loss of self identity and control. As Lacan mentions, language alienates man from himself and his real identity since the “I” represented in the language is different from the “I” that uses the language to represent himself (Bressler, 2007, pp.152-155). That Bartleby violates the system of language emphasizes his understanding of the desperate situation he is trapped in and his attempts to oppose alienation in all its aspects.

In a key section of *The Confidence-Man*, the last novel he published during his lifetime, Herman Melville allows the narrator to meditate on the notion of an “original” character. The term is used too frequently, he says, and few characters are truly original. He names only three characters as such: Hamlet, Don Quixote, and Milton’s Satan. Certainly, there are plenty of odd, peculiar, or unique characters, but Melville insists that they are unlikely to be original.

What is popularly held to entitle characters in fiction to be deemed original is but something personal—confined to

itself. The character sheds not its characteristic on its surroundings, whereas, the original character, essentially such, is like a revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all round it—everything is lit by it, everything starts up to it (mark how it is with Hamlet), so that, in certain minds, there follows upon the adequate conception of such a character, an effect, in its way, akin to that which in Genesis attends upon the beginning of things. (Melville, 1971, p.205)

Bartleby seems to fit the description of the original character. Through his character, he represents a deep and troubling sense of alienation that affects all other characters in the story as well as the reader. He does not fit into the definition of the typical scrivener, and neither is he the odd type who is sometimes considered original (wrongly, according to Melville). By having Bartleby's story told by a narrator who admits that he really does not know the man; Melville emphasizes the originality of the character. An omniscient, third-person narrator might be able to reveal more about Bartleby, and any "original source" might add useful information, but the lawyer does not have that knowledge and is clearly attempting to understand Bartleby along with the reader. Though the lawyer's attempts to understand Bartleby are all left impotent, but during this search he understands more about himself and others around him. In other words his entire search ends up to a single point, i.e. understanding his own condition and reality as a human being. It is as if Bartleby is a mirror through which everyone can have a clear vision of his nature and life. Throughout the tale, the perplexed lawyer searches not only his own extensive personal experience in working with copyists but also literature and philosophy in hopes of finding a clue to Bartleby's queer "preference". As we see, Bartleby's "logic of preference" that the lawyer finds so confounding becomes a linguistic contagion in the office. The lawyer finds himself "involuntarily using the word 'prefer' upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions," and – although they seem unconscious of it – the other scriveners have begun using the word as well. "I thought to myself, surely I must get rid of this demented man, who has already in some degree turned the tongues, if not the heads, of myself and clerks" (Melville, 1996, p.31).

The lawyer realizes that Bartleby does not *actively* refuse to "read the copies," but (as Deleuze suggests) he cannot understand the logic of Bartleby's formula. For instance, when he asks Bartleby to go to the post office and Bartleby responds with "I would prefer not to," the lawyer presses him: "You *will* not?" Bartleby responds, "I *prefer* not" (Melville, 1996, p.25). Melville's italics emphasize the distinction. The lawyer is so puzzled that he consults "Edwards on the Will" and "Priestly on Necessity," works by two theologians who believe in predestination and adamantly deny the existence of free will. Instead of reaching an understanding that would make Bartleby less alien, the lawyer has grasped the reality of his alienation and absurdity of his condition:

"Gradually I slid into the persuasion that these troubles of mine, touching the scrivener, had been predestinated from eternity, and Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like me to fathom" (Melville, 1996, p.37).

This statement is, I would venture to say, Melville's attempt to sarcastically question humanity's way of coming to terms with his absurd and inescapable life and to be content with his own limited grasp. That every one of us is another Bartleby, an alienated entity whose reality is impossible to understand is another point emphasized by this part of the story. Though we may not be conscious of it, we behave and think like Bartleby, the same way that other scriveners in the story did. This point is surely underlined by Melville at the final line of the story when the lawyer laments Bartleby's death by saying "Ah Bartleby, Ah Humanity". This is also a good proof for the claim made earlier that Bartleby is an original character, since he is a one who "sheds light" to all his surroundings and makes them see and be seen.

The epilogue, disclosing a rumor about Bartleby's previous life in the Dead Letter Office, is a final attempt to make sense of the inscrutable man. The lawyer, and perhaps the reader, thinks he has stumbled upon the clue to understanding Bartleby's demeanor. But disposing of "dead letters" does not really explain Bartleby; it merely adds to the overall picture of alienation that Bartleby personifies. At the Dead Letter Office, Bartleby presumably handled words whose intended recipients were dead. In working as a scrivener, he too was handling "dead" letters, copies of copies, having no direct contact with the original. As Cathy Davidson has rather caustically pointed out, "The narrator rhetorically assesses how much clerking in a Dead Letter Office would have damaged Bartleby's psyche and all the while he overlooks the equally unfortunate consequences his own business copying the dead letter of the law might have had" (Davidson, 1978, p.58). At the Tombs, the "grub-man" mistakes Bartleby for "a gentleman forger," which he is in a sense. But the lawyer says he "was never socially acquainted with any forgers" (Melville, 1996, p.44) and does not know such people. Death, man's inescapable end, seems not to help the matter too. It even adds to the uncertainty and confusion about Bartleby's reality (or humanity in general). As a person, a worker, and a writer, Bartleby is an *original* character, and as such he is utterly alien and alienated. Indeed, Bartleby's alienation—from society, from his work, from his fellow man, and, at the end, from himself—makes him profoundly *unknowable* and *unreadable*, a condition that (as Melville have suggested) may await us all as members of modern human societies.

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