

## Preferring not to: Bartleby's NO in... Silence!

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“See better, Lear; and let me still remain / The true blank of thine eye.”  
W. Shakespeare, *King Lear*

“But then again, what has the whale to say?”

“I have swam through libraries and sailed through oceans.”  
H. Melville, *Moby Dick*

I was first introduced to Herman Melville's work as an undergraduate student and, to this day, his fiction continues to be for me an object of ever-renewed fascination. As such, I decided to revisit one of the texts that I addressed early in my scholarly work, in order to honor João Almeida Flor, my highly respected Professor of Romanticism back in the early 1970s, and the no less respected and esteemed colleague (and friend) of the past decades, with whom I continue to learn today.

In the following lines I shall once again engage in the discussion of one of Melville's more compelling short stories, “Bartleby”.<sup>1</sup> It was first published in 1853 in the *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art*<sup>2</sup> under the title “Bartleby, the Scrivener. A Story of Wall Street”. Later, it was included in his collection *The Piazza Tales* (1856) as the first piece following the introductory “The Piazza” with the title abridged to the name of the character, “Bartleby”.<sup>3</sup> Since then, this text has been the source of endless criticism, the inspiration for numerous literary works, and the object of several theatrical and cinematographic adaptations. But to my knowledge, it has hardly been approached as an example of the author's continuing literary conversation with one of the writers whom he admired and who

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<sup>1</sup> For my former work on this short story see Gonçalves 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Nov 1853, Vol. II, No. XI; 546–557, and Dec. 1853, Vol. II: 609–615.

<sup>3</sup> The Northwestern-Newberry editors restored the full title carried by the *Putnam's Magazine* text and it is this title that is also adopted by the Library of America edition used here.

influenced his work the most, i.e., Shakespeare.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, conspicuously missing in critical approaches to this story in particular is the dialogue that, in my view, it establishes with *King Lear*, a play Melville avowedly revered, considering it a masterpiece of the art of telling what he deemed the "vital truth":

But it is those deep far-away things in [Shakespeare]; those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality: —these are the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare. Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago, he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them. Tormented into desperation, Lear the frantic King tears off the mask, and speaks the sane madness of vital truth. But, as I before said, it is the least part of genius that attracts admiration. [...] And if I magnify Shakespeare, it is not so much for what he did do, as for what he did not do, or refrained from doing. For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth, —even though it be covertly, and by snatches [...] few men have time, or patience, or palate, for the spiritual truth as it is in that great genius. (2000b: 916-17)

Melville even ventures to state that his reverence for Shakespeare does not mean that he places this author on an unapproachable pedestal, quite the contrary:

[An] absolute and unconditional adoration of Shakespeare has grown to be a part of our Anglo Saxon superstitions. The Thirty-Nine Articles are now Forty. Intolerance has come to exist in this matter. You must believe in Shakespeare's unapproachability, or quit the country. But what sort of belief is this for an American, a man who is bound to carry republican progressiveness into Literature, as well as into Life? Believe me, my friends, that men not very much inferior to Shakespeare, are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio [...] great geniuses are parts of the times; they themselves are the time. (2000b: 918)<sup>5</sup>

So why would he not probe into the possibilities of a fair dialogue with the master? As early as 1941, F. O. Matthiessen commented on the relevance of Shakespeare for Melville and argued that "the most important effect of Shakespeare's use of language was to give Melville a range of vocabulary for expressing passion far beyond any that he had previously possessed". (1941: 425) More recently McCall also highlighted that influence:

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<sup>4</sup> For a summary of Melville's 491 markings in the seven-volume Hilliard & Grey edition of Shakespeare plays see Markels 1977.

<sup>5</sup> From "Hawthorne and His Mosses", first published in *The Literary World*, August 17 and 24, 1850.

To be sure, nothing Melville ever read altered his mind so radically as Shakespeare did, unless it was the Bible. But almost anything he read could mean something to him, and even a little story in the newspaper could move him profoundly. His own linguistic resources were marvelously extended and strengthened by his immersion in the Elizabethans; that great experience had the consequence of working in the other direction, too, so that anything he read found itself transformed into the massive instrument of his own language. (1989: 32)

Melville did, indeed, “sw[i]m through libraries” with a keen eye for what might serve his purpose as a writer and Shakespeare’s work was undoubtedly one that fostered his “sail[ing] through oceans” (Melville 1983: 935) of language and more. And it is my argument that *King Lear* figures prominently in the ocean the reader is invited to sail in “Bartleby”. I would like to add at this point that I do so fully aware of the pitfalls of a critical practice that McCall labels as “self-hypnotism” and trusting that my reading will not simply add just another piece of “literary gossip” to what he names the “Bartleby Industry” (1989: 14, 21).

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That this apparently simple story is only deceptively so has been consensually acknowledged. There have been, naturally enough, an extremely varied range of readings for this text. The critical attention it has received has produced a number of volumes big enough to fill several library shelves and has rightly elicited critical approaches to the complexity of the sources acknowledgely or likely used by its author — such as newspaper articles (Bergmann 1975), the Bible (McCall 1989), Emerson (Sten 1974, Davies 2009),<sup>6</sup> Dickens, Poe, Hawthorne (Weisbuch 1986), Cicero (Singleton 1975), or Marx (Reed 2004) and many more. It has even been argued that it is almost as if the literary world had demanded that a Bartleby come into existence: “Depuis, à l’instar de Joseph K. ou de Gregor Samsa, du prince Mychkine ou des frères Karamazov, de Hamlet ou de Dom Quichotte, quelqu’un existe en littérature que s’appelle Bartleby.” (Arditi-Alasraki 2009: 45)<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, despite all the recognition of the significance of Shakespeare for Melville and the many uses this American writer made of his plays, *King Lear* seems

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<sup>6</sup> Clark Davies affirms that “Bartleby, the Scrivener” offers no specific portrait of the Sage of Concord among its Dickensian lawyers and copyists, but it speaks directly to the challenges posed by Emerson’s radical account of self-reliance and social responsibility. Melville’s story can be read plausibly as a relentless and uncompromising exploration of Emerson’s implied but unrealized anarchy. (2009: 48)

<sup>7</sup> On the early reception of this work, Inge writes: “He [the average reader] had little preparation for it, as it is a piece of fiction unlike any other he was likely to read in the contemporary periodicals. For that matter, American readers were not to encounter anything like it again until the 1930s when the works of an Austrian writer, Franz Kafka [...], were translated into English.” (1979: 9) See also Monteiro 1971.

to have gone unnoticed as far as readings of "Bartleby" are concerned. Still, in my view, the fact that, in this tragedy, Lear's youngest daughter, Cordelia, both repeatedly and uncompromisingly refuses to accommodate in her use of language the demands of a world she perceives as untrue and also uses the expression "*would prefer*" in a most forceful way cannot be taken merely as a curious coincidence. It rather demands that an enquiry into a possible connection between these two works so very different but also similar at a deeper level than the one that meets the eye be done. After all, readers would be wise to follow Kent's induction to Lear, and strive again and again to "see better". (I. i. 157)

It is not as if the Wall Street lawyer who is the narrator in Melville's short story should simply be considered a more modern replica of the Shakespearean king. Yet, he is no less the "honorable" (Melville 2003: 644)<sup>8</sup>, advanced in age, high ruler of a kingdom-like law office, which is itself described as fully functional and increasingly prosperous, although not exempt from the disturbances caused by the striking personalities of those that are part of it.<sup>9</sup> That the law office of the narrator and the way it is organized may represent, in a humorous way, the kind of balanced, positive world, ever on the path of progress and improvement that the Transcendentalists believed in, has been rightly argued.<sup>10</sup> But that the criticism of such a view, done by Melville at a time in which his trust in humanity's capacity for true improvement and real solidarity was at its lowest, would be obliquely done via *King Lear* seems to me quite remarkable.

"Bartleby" opens with the explanation by the narrator, who remains nameless to the end, of the reasons for the telling itself:

[I]f I pleased, [I] could relate divers histories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep. But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener of the strangest I ever saw or heard of. While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case those are very small. What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, *that* is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report which will appear in the sequel. (641)

Of the many interesting features of this paragraph, I would like at this point to underline but three: first, the scrivener is the strangest the narrator "ever saw";

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<sup>8</sup> Subsequent references to "Bartleby" will be followed by the page number only, in parentheses.

<sup>9</sup> The reader will eventually know, in an oblique way, that he is "an elderly man", about sixty years old, when his clerk Turkey tells him: "Old age—even if it blot the page—is honorable. With submission, sir, we *both* are getting old." (644 – emphasis in the original)

<sup>10</sup> Cf., for example, Sten 1974.

secondly, what his “astonished eyes saw” is almost the sole source of information he has concerning Bartleby; and thirdly, he uses “nothing” twice related to what can be known about this figure. All this insistence on seeing as a form of knowing may surely be understood as a pun on Emerson’s transfiguration into a “transparent eyeball” who is “nothing” and “see[s] all”. (Emerson 1983: 10) But it must, of necessity in textual terms, also be linked to what the narrator will affirm later on, when he uses “see” to introduce Bartleby to the reader. Moreover, it brings up the correlation between sight and knowledge that is also pervasive in the Shakespearean play.

And the preamble goes on:

Ere introducing the scrivener, as he first appeared to me, it is fit I make some mention of myself, my *employees*, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings; because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented. (641)

Indeed, I might add, because, even though the narrator is most probably unaware of what he is doing, he is, in fact, stating that he is used to do as he pleases and that this story is, after all, not so much the story of Bartleby, but the lawyer’s own — how he recalls this mysterious figure and, more importantly, what it felt like to have to handle his own perplexity at the course of events that followed “the advent of Bartleby.” (642)<sup>11</sup> A highly significant device used by Melville to serve his oblique narrative strategy, is the narrator’s “by the way[s]” (642) which are profuse and extremely revealing in terms of his storytelling. They provide the framework for the reader’s understanding of him as someone who subscribes to the ethics of personal comfort above all — “the easiest way of life is the best” (641) — and who, although a “man of peace” (644), plainly asserts that he does not allow that he be disturbed — “nothing of that sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace” (641). The reader will also realize that the peace he demands does not refer to a high moral principle but is simply the peace to “in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men’s bonds and mortgages and title-deeds.” (641) Additionally, so he tells his audience, it displeases him intensely that he has been cheated out of his “pleasantly remunerative” expectations: “I had counted upon a life-lease of the profits, whereas I only received those of a few short years. But this is by the way”. (642)

Finally in the narration of this self-satisfied lawyer, in comes Bartleby to, as it were, disrupt “the Wall Street office and the Wall Street man with his *preferences*.” (Johnson 2005: 6) Who would, indeed, expect that a scrivener who is but very poorly paid for an eye-and-hand-straining, very arduous work of making “quadruplicates” (650) of “five hundred pages” (649) documents, would turn into a Shakespearean Cordelia-like character and have “preferences” (661)? But then, who would imagine

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<sup>11</sup> Claudia D. Johnson calls the attention to the fact that “the title character does not appear until nine pages into the short story.” (2005: 2) Noticeable is also Melville’s use of biblical language, of which this quote is but an instance.

that a dutiful, loving and cherished princess, centuries before, would refuse to accommodate her royal father's self-congratulatory wish for hollow, highfaluting discourse and forcibly express her unmovable preferences? Certainly not Lear, the King, nor the 1850s lawyer of Wall Street.

Yet, this is what happens in both texts. And, as interesting as this parallel attitude of a Thoreau-like civil disobedience might have been for both Shakespeare and Melville, the authors' main concern in these texts seems to lie rather in what this stance may imply about the relation of the language commonly used in social intercourse to the truthful expression of sentiment and thought, e.g., to real human interaction. And *King Lear* and "Bartleby" decidedly "sa[y] No! in thunder"<sup>12</sup> to false language or "idle talk" (669) even if they mostly draw on silence to do it.

Shakespeare's tragedy and Melville's short story have, in my opinion, much in common, starting with structure. In both, it is the initial scene, involving Lear and Cordelia, on the one hand, and the narrator and Bartleby, on the other, that triggers the tragic action and denouement that follow. As further argued below, the confrontation that takes place in Act I Scene 1 between father and daughter, in *King Lear*, is not very dissimilar from the scene representing the first encounter between the lawyer and the title character in "Bartleby", which is almost immediately followed by confrontation. While somewhat disregarded by most criticism, this scene in "Bartleby" is the crucial one in the text because, besides introducing the seemingly object of the story, Bartleby, it sets the tone and course of events in such a way that inexorably leads to the final demise of the figure who, like Cordelia, refuses to take words lightly.<sup>13</sup> And one should bear in mind that language was for Melville, as for Shakespeare, a powerful tool and arena for action.

Consistent parallels may also be found thematically-wise. Lear commits the initial and maybe early modern, capitalistic mistake (or sin) of trying to measure his daughters' devotion and love, thus placing himself within the framework of mercantile values rather than natural, social or even religious ones. That he tries to measure what cannot easily (or at all) be measured already hints at the blindness he will later show to the answers he gets to his self-congratulatory question: "Which

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Melville's letter to Hawthorne, April 16?, 1851. <http://www.melville.org/letter2.htm>. *The Life and Works of Herman Melville*. Web March 1, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> One might say of Melville, when he wrote "Bartleby", what Kenneth Muir writes about Shakespeare when he penned *King Lear*: "Shakespeare was certainly in a ruthless mood when he wrote *King Lear*, and his religious attitude provides no easy comfort, and makes no concessions to sentimentality. [...] Cordelia dies. To some critics [...] it would have been better if Shakespeare had allowed the miseries of Lear to be concluded in the reconciliation scene. Such critics [are] mistaken [...] It is right that the final scenes of the play should make us shrink, but wrong that we should wish them altered. When Lear banished Cordelia [...] he] unleashed horrors [...] and the innocent are at least as vulnerable as the guilty. Indeed, it may be said, it is because of her very virtues that Cordelia is chosen to be a victim of the ruthless destiny that broods over the tragic scene [...]"(Shakespeare 1967: lviii)

of you shall we say doth love us most?" (I. i. 51) Similarly, what mostly matters for the Wall Street lawyer, as seen above and amply developed in the narrative, is his business in a world in which materialist values are rampant. Even "the divine injunction: 'a new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another'", is seen by him under a self-serving light: "charity often operates as a vastly wise and prudent principle — a great safeguard to its possessor." (667)

Furthermore, and contrary to what would be expected, both in Lear's kingdom and the Wall Street lawyer's office, there comes someone who dares to say no to such a world. Cordelia, much like Bartleby, refuses to speak but sparingly — "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent." (I. i. 62) — and then only to serve a high purpose, truth. She is confident that her love will be expression enough but the events will tragically prove her wrong:

Cordelia. [Aside] Then poor Cordelia! / And yet not so; since, I am sure, my love's / More ponderous than my tongue.

Lear. [...] Now, our joy, / Although our last, and least; [...] what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

Cordelia. Nothing, my lord.

Lear: Nothing?

Cordelia. Nothing.

Lear. Nothing will come of nothing: speak again.

[...]

Cordelia. Good my Lord, / You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me: I / Return those duties back as are right fit, / Obey you, love you, and most honour you.

[...]

Lear. But goes thy heart with this?

Cordelia. Ay, my good Lord.

Lear. So young, and so untender?

Cordelia. So young, my lord, and true. [I. i. 77-107]

Furthermore, shunned by Lear after been found wanting in "that glib and oily art, / To speak and purpose not" (I. i. 224-25), she addresses her sisters as she departs, saying:

CORDELIA: [...] Love well our father: / To your professed bosoms I commit him: / But yet, alas! stood I within his grace, / *I would prefer* him to a better place. / So farewell to you both. (I. i. 271-75 — my emphasis).

Truth in the use of words is key to Cordelia's position, since only such a language will do for a verily, deep relational approach to life that can define one as human. And so is it for Bartleby, who appears at the lawyer's door in response to an advertisement for "additional help" (647). This ad, so very usual in the business world, does however contain suggestive implications in its phrasing that Melville would not have been blind to when he chose to use it as he did. It suggests an asking for help, capable of creating expectations in a person who answers it that are similar to those that Cordelia, the hitherto most cherished daughter of Lear, would also have when summoned by her father. Yet neither Cordelia nor Bartleby will meet

with what they might have expected. Bartleby is quickly engaged to work, yes, but only to be placed in a corner and handled in a way that would be fit for a mechanical writing device but never for a man who is described as "incurably forlorn" (648):<sup>14</sup>

After a *few words* touching his qualifications, I engaged him, glad to have among my corps of copyists a man of so singularly sedate an aspect, which I thought might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey, and the fiery one of Nippers.

[...] I resolved to assign Bartleby a corner by the folding-doors, but on my side of them, so as to have this quiet man within easy call, in case any trifling thing was to be done. [...] Still further to a satisfactory arrangement, I procured a high green folding screen, which might *entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight*, though not remove him from my voice. And thus, in a manner, privacy and society were conjoined. (648 — my emphasis)

"Society" for whom, one might ask? Certainly not for the scrivener who is entirely isolated from the lawyer's sight and, according to the narrator:

did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically. (648)

There is no hint in the narration of the existence of a simple gesture of human relation between these two characters until what I consider to be the last moments of the first scene in this story, equivalent to the above cited Act I, Scene 1 of *King Lear*. Bartleby is "abruptly called" "on the third day" (649)<sup>15</sup> from his entombment-like corner, located by a window which "commanded at present no view at all" (648), in an office itself "deficient in what landscape painters call 'life'" (642). The narrator goes on describing in detail the scene that follows:

In my haste and natural expectancy of instant compliance, *I sat with my head bent over the original on my desk*, and my right hand sideways, and somewhat nervously extended with the copy, so that immediately upon emerging from his retreat, Bartleby might snatch it and proceed to business without the least delay.

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<sup>14</sup> One should notice that "forlorn" is also used by Cordelia in reference to Lear's pitiable condition: "And wast thou fain, poor father, / To hovel thee with swine and rogues *forlorn* / In short and musty straw? Alack, alack! / 'Tis wonder that thy life and wits at once / Had not concluded all." (IV. vii. 38-42 – my emphasis)

<sup>15</sup> This ironic expression, as others used by the narrator – such as "the advent of Bartleby" above mentioned –, highlight the Bible as another major reference text for Melville's work.



*In this very attitude did I sit when I called to him*, rapidly stating what it was I wanted him to do — namely, to examine a small paper with me. Imagine my surprise, nay, my consternation, when without moving from his privacy, Bartleby in a *singularly mild, firm voice*, replied, “*I would prefer not to.*” (649 — my emphases)

That the lawyer summons his scrivener in an abrupt tone, without caring to even once take his eyes from his document to look at him, tells much more about his lack of insight into his own life and the life of those who live around him than all the storytelling he engages in under the pretext stated at the onset of his narrative. In addition, this scene also foregrounds in the short story the crucial importance of the act of seeing as an act of knowing and, conversely, of not-seeing or blindness as ignorance in what concerns human relations, a matter that is central both in *King Lear* and “Bartleby”, as already mentioned. And, last but not least, it shows Bartleby adopting Cordelia’s attitude of refusal to comply with such blindness.

Bartleby and Cordelia share, moreover, not only a stance towards the expected “compliance” with authority but also a tone of voice — “Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle, and low” (V. iii. 272-73) — and even the word “prefer”. This is a word which, albeit deemed strange — “Prefer [...] queer word, I never use it myself” (661) — will in time invade everyone’s language in the lawyer’s office, including that of the narrator himself. Thematic similarities between the two texts also exist in what concerns other major characters. Both the lawyer and Lear share, for example, a fear of losing their minds: “I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way” (661), writes the lawyer; “And, to deal plainly, / I fear I am not in my perfect mind” (IV. vii. 62-3), says Lear. Being in control of one’s world is crucial to both, which explains why the challenge to their authority coming from so unexpected sources is such a blow to their sense of what they are and think.<sup>16</sup>

Melville’s and Shakespeare’s texts also share similar scenes. The lawyer and the king try to, respectively, make Bartleby and Cordelia comply with their demands and speak: “Will you not speak?” (651) and “Nothing will come of nothing: speak again.” (I. i. 90). The resulting surprise and revulsion at the answers received are quite the same even if, due to the differences in character that distinguish Melville’s narrator from Lear, the dismissal of the scrivener is far less abrupt than Cordelia’s. In Melville’s story, the revulsion felt by the Wall Street lawyer is such that he will eventually opt for “pretending not to see Bartleby at all”. (666) And it is the pervasive emphasis on sight (or lack of it) in this text — for example, Bartleby, when pressed once more for answers will merely reply “Do you not see the reason for yourself” (662) — that, in fact, demands that some affirmations of the narrator be questioned once again.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Arsic who writes: “Bartleby is a threat not only to his property or business but also, as it turns out, to his ‘head’, to the way he thinks and acts. [...] The lawyer’s thinking cannot think Bartleby’s thinking. (2007: 12).

"I can see that figure now" (648), writes the nameless lawyer when introducing Bartleby. The fact that he does not say "I can *still* see this figure now" introduces an ambiguity in the telling of the story that begs that we ask what I deem the most important question here: could he see that figure at the time it presented itself before his eyes? And if we read carefully, we have to come to the conclusion that he could not — that is, not until Bartleby took to repeat his unsettling answer to any request, "I prefer not to". And when he finally sees Bartleby he does that only through the lens of his own concerns with self-preservation even though robed in the rhetoric of democratic, Christian, business or legal languages. The ironic fact that this lawyer of Wall Street "prefers not to" take any personal responsibility in what may have triggered the attitude of his most unusual employee suggests the kind of dangerous blindness Melville admiringly saw hinted at in Shakespearean "darker characters". After all, the Melvillean narrator's act of "preferring" to ascribe responsibility for Bartleby's situation to anything but himself, be it divine predestination (668), dead letters offices (677), and humanity's general plight (678), is not far from the attitude referred by the cerebral, rationalist, but also manipulative Edmund in the following soliloquy:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, / when we are sick in fortune,  
often the surfeits of / our own behaviour, we make guilty of our / disasters the  
sun, the moon, and stars; as if we were / villains on necessity, fools by heavenly  
compulsion, / knaves, thieves, and treachers, by spherical pre— / dominance,  
drunkards, liars, and adulterers, by an / enforc'd obedience of planetary  
influence; and / all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. / An admirable  
evasion of whoremaster man, to lay / his goatish disposition to the charge of  
a star! (I. ii. 124-34)

However, the question often posed by critics sympathetic to the quandary of the narrator is: "what else could the narrator do"? (Stern 2008, 32)<sup>17</sup> In my view, the question that should be asked is rather: "what else could the narrator have done when he first met the man he portrays as 'pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn'"? (648) One need also question if the superlative tone used by the lawyer to describe Bartleby's condition is not the result of his later attempt to grasp what he is at odds to understand rather than a truthful correspondence to the actual perception he had of Bartleby at the time he appeared at his open office door.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In this they follow the lawyer's own affirmation: "I had now done all that I possibly could". However, one should also notice what he goes on to say: "I now strove to be entirely care-free and quiescent; and my conscience justified me in the attempt; though indeed it was not so successful as I could have wished." (674)

<sup>18</sup> The narrator will even hint at this when he states: "just in proportion as the forlornness of Bartleby grew and grew to my imagination, did that same melancholy merge into fear, that pity into repulsion." (659)

To search for the answer to the above questions one does not need to speculate much or go beyond Melville's text and the way it presents the characters of the lawyer and Bartleby.<sup>19</sup> Similarly to what occurs in *King Lear*, it is what happens in what I earlier called the first act in the short story that determines all the subsequent course of the tragic action. And what happens in this act in "Bartleby", as referred above, is the total absence of a relational, and thus human, gesture from the narrator towards his new scrivener. Three days go by without a single personal contact and, on the third, when the scrivener is finally summoned, the lawyer does not even look up from his papers to face and tell him what he expects. He just sits with his "*head bent over the original on [his] desk*". Moreover, because the lawyer will never be able to see himself as the probable cause for what is happening before his astonished eyes, he cannot even mourn as Lear does when he howls in grief and finally cries before dying "I might have sav'd her; now she's gone for ever!" (V. iii. 270)

Rephrasing the famous question posed by Hamlet, I would venture to say that "to see or not to see" is the real question in "Bartleby". Who or what is seen and under which circumstances? How is the seeing, both of others and of oneself, affected by everyday business and haste? Concurrently, one also needs to ask if the death of Bartleby does imply a straightforward condemnation of the narrator. And for me the answer is no, not really. It just demands the realization that his non-seeing is more often than not the way of the world. Furthermore, it is also Melville's artful way of calling the reader's attention to the fact that non-seeing others is not inconsequential either, quite the opposite.

"Tormented into desperation, Lear the frantic King tears off the mask, and speaks the sane madness of vital truth", writes Melville as quoted above. Tormented into perplexity, the "eminently safe" lawyer of Wall Street does not dare to do it, lest his confidence in a world of ever increasing material progress, wealth, order and power might be shattered. Although he presents himself in a sympathetic way, inducing in most readers a similarly sympathetic response to his predicament, he remains the obtuse, non-clairvoyant master to the end.<sup>20</sup> He proves to be, after all, even more than Lear, the "very foolish fond old man" (IV. vii. 60) who cannot grasp, even at the time of the telling, what he should have seen back then, in time to avoid unleashing a tragic course of events, and did not.

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<sup>19</sup> Delbanco even affirms that: "a kind of progressive deafness seems to have set in among the critics toward the exquisite inflections of Melville's language, which is where real reading must surely begin." (1992: 716)

<sup>20</sup> In this I differ from McCall's view expressed in the following terms: "Bartleby is the cry *Help* incarnate, or so the Lawyer hears it. In the opening paragraphs of the story the Lawyer brags about what we see as wrong with him. At the end he sees it himself. Bartleby came into his life when his life was not much worth living. When Bartleby dies, 'I cannot adequately express the emotions which seize me.' Grief awakens the man to his own life, and 'humanity' is forever changed." (1989: 154)

Inspired by Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Melville crafted the extraordinary story of the blindness of a Wall Street lawyer, as much mentally enclosed by walls as his office is, who is keen on telling the reader all he saw of *Bartleby*, but fails to see and grasp his own responsibility in *Bartleby*'s decision to "prefer not to". Yet, Melville did it in such a way that it gives readers the amplest of spaces to go about their own deciphering of the reasons for the title character's radical, unusual behavior. My tentative parallel drawn between this short story and *King Lear* is just another instance of such an ongoing task.

"*Bartleby*" remains perhaps the most enticing of Melville's "craftily" wrought texts, which present to the reader a no smaller challenge than Shakespeare's. They keep inviting readers to engage in multiple and ever-renewed readings, if they are to get at "those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth" (2000b: 916) in them. Melville himself, "an American [...] bound to carry republican progressiveness into Literature" (2000b: 918), did aim for no less when he, confronted with the works of the "masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth", read the tragedy of *King Lear* as a text that he could creatively engage with to serve his most serious concerns about life in the new world time of his America.

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