

# Melville and Hawthorne: A Reinterpretation of *Bartleby the Scrivener*

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## Abstract

Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853) was composed in a period when Melville was under the strong influence of Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose friendship he valued most, sharing similar aesthetic interests and ideas. When closely examined, the story shows a revealing connection with Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) in its narrative framework and sequence of episodes. The comparison between the two works suggests that Melville's original intention was to create a story that would stand in striking contrast to the other. This idea offers a new approach to the author's mind, adding increased depth and insight into our understanding of his work.

## Introduction

Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* was originally published in two installments on November 1 & December 1, 1853, in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*.<sup>1</sup> The publisher sent him 85 dollars by check, and that was all the author received for his 17 pages of work (Newman 19). Never could he have known that this short piece would later become one of the most widely-read texts in literature classes, creating what Dan McCall calls the "Bartleby

Industry” (McCall 99).

In 1848, five years before *Bartleby's* publication, Nathaniel Hawthorne lost his office as the surveyor of the customhouse in Salem, and with it his annual salary of \$1,500—due to the change of administration in Washington. Two years later, his *Scarlet Letter* was published. It became an instant bestseller, earning him a total of \$1,500 over 14 years. By the time the two authors came to know each other later in the same year, Hawthorne was already a successful man of letters. Though both had lost their fathers in early childhood, there was not much affinity between the two men. While Hawthorne's life was relatively secure and easy, Melville's was one of continuous struggle against adversity. Melville, however, came to be intensely devoted toward the man, admiring his work profusely in his review essay “Hawthorne and his *Mosses*.” He also dedicated his *Moby-Dick* (1851) to Hawthorne “in memory of his genius.” In Hawthorne, to borrow Laurie Robertson-Lorant's words, “Melville found a soul mate, a father, a brother, and a friend” (52).

At the time of their encounter, both lived in Berkshire, Massachusetts. Exchanging visits and letters, they kept a close relationship until Hawthorne left the vicinity in the fall of 1851. The two authors gradually became alienated, but Hawthorne's literary influence on Melville's fiction remained, “beginning with *Moby-Dick* and continuing all through the writing done in the 1850s” (Waggoner 136-37). Pointing out the interesting parallels between the chief subjects taken up in Hawthorne's *The Old Manse* and Melville's *The Piazza Tales*, Hyatt H. Waggoner suggests that the “stylistic and thematic Hawthorneisms” (142) that Melville

employed in his *Piazza* “constitute a sharp rebuttal of the religious and domestic idealism implicit in Hawthorne’s sketch” (141). The procedure does not always lead to a satisfactory result, but at its best, “the final product subverts, overturns, or answers Hawthorne’s meaning in the characteristic image, passage, or tale that Melville in effect rewrote to make it, as he thought, truer” (139).

Concerning Melville’s extensive allusions to Hawthorne’s works, his appropriation of their subjects and themes only to go counter to and complement Hawthorne’s ideas and views, I find little to differ from Waggoner. In this thesis, however, I would like to focus our argument on the possible connection between Melville’s *Bartleby* and Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. A point-by-point comparison of the two reveals striking parallels between them, suggesting that Melville consciously employed the same subjects and themes Hawthorne treated in his *Scarlet Letter*, while at the same time, using them in a way to present the reality of human experience as more stark and tragic than Hawthorne conceived it.

In the beginning, *Bartleby* seems to be a fairly harmless satire. The author criticizes the 19th-century materialistic society and its utilitarian thinking, mocking the hypocrisy of its ethics and values. The criticism itself seems quite inoffensive since it is presented in a humorous manner, reflected in weaknesses and deceptions of a typically materialistic Wall Street lawyer. The basic concept of the story seems to be clear, but then, another question emerges. After all, it’s about a worker who goes on strike. The lawyer seems to be a fairly worldly man who could act quite callously if the situation requires. Why should he be so tormented by Bartleby’s

“preference” not to incorporate with him? We see it in the way he acts that grows increasingly irrational as the story progresses, and we feel it in his narrative tone, which, in spite of his effort to keep a congenial air, grows darker and more constrained. To find out the reason, we must discover what is behind their confrontation. The lawyer claims that Bartleby’s strange refusal to work is the only cause of the conflict between them. We can’t, however, take his words at face value, for Bartleby is silent. And it is in this regard that Hawthorne comes to hold a significant meaning. Using his *Scarlet Letter* as a key to break Bartleby’s silence, we can establish a plausible scenario to unlock the mysterious aspects of the story that have long baffled readers.

#### I *The Isle of the Cross and Bartleby, the Scrivener*

Many critics have speculated about the circumstances surrounding Melville’s composition of *Bartleby*. How did he come to conceive the story? As is suggested by Lea Bertani Vozar Newman, one of the most commonly accepted sources is the story of “Agatha” (Newman 23-24). Between August and December of 1852, Melville wrote a series of three letters which are now known as the “Agatha letters.” In his first letter, Melville communicated Hawthorne about a lawyer’s account of an intriguing case of Agatha Hatch of Falmouth who married a sailor named Robertson and gave birth to a child. Robertson left her two years after the marriage, and while she was waiting for his return unaware that he had deserted her, he entered into a successful and profitable business in Alexandria D.C. and illegally married two other

women. After seventeen years, Robertson suddenly reappeared before Agatha and her daughter, offering some assistance to the family, but his bigamy was kept in close secret. It was only after he died and a legal dispute over his property arose that the whole affair was disclosed. In the letter, Melville enclosed the lawyer's memorandum (Horth 621-625) and encouraged Hawthorne to write a story based on it, saying "You have a skeleton of actual reality to build about with fullness & vein & beauty" (Horth 237). Hawthorne, however, showed reluctance in accepting the offer. Melville's last letter communicates his decision to pick up the story himself, promising to start working on it "immediately upon reaching home." Asking Hawthorne for his literary advice on his project, Melville ends his letter by writing "I invoke your blessing upon my endeavors; and breathe a fair wind upon me" (Horth 242). Circumstantial evidences suggest that he actually worked on the project during the winter of 1852-53. In the spring of 1853, he took an unidentified manuscript to New York, which was probably his "Agatha story"—now known as *The Isle of the Cross* among critics,—but it was never published, nor has the manuscript ever been located.<sup>2</sup>

Many critics, including myself, have acknowledged the "likelihood that Agatha of the 1852 letters metamorphosed into Bartleby of the summer of 1853" (Newman 23), but in what manner it was transformed has been a matter of conjecture. Though the lawyer's original account is quite suggestive, almost nothing is known about the actual plot-line of this missing *The Isle of the Cross*. From Melville's advice to Hawthorne, however, that he should "Ponder

the conduct of this Robinson throughout.—Mark his [Robertson’s] trepidation & suspicion when any one called upon him (Horth 237),”<sup>3</sup> we could surmise that Melville must have had a story in mind of concealment and a sense of guilt on the man’s part.

## II *The Scarlet Letter* and *Bartleby, the Scrivener*

There is an interesting suggestion from Newman that Melville’s mention of a “rotting wooden postbox,” to which the woman pays daily homage for seventeen years, may have some affiliation with Bartleby’s rumored history as a worker in the Dead Letter Office (Newman 24).

The sequel of *Bartleby* ends with the following passage.

Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men? . . . For by the cart-load they are annually burned. Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring: the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity: he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death. Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity! (200)<sup>4</sup>

As Newman points out, when the image of a woman daily visiting a postbox is conjoined with the possible tragic situations caused by the miscarried letters, it may give us some hint as to the possible plot-line of Melville’s “Agatha” story: “the gradual but steady decay of her hopes as she waits for letters that, like the ‘good tidings’ consigned to the Dead Letter Office, never arrive” (Newman

24).

The image by itself cannot be of much use to go further in our argument, but when it is reexamined in conjunction with the meaning of the narrator's specific reference to Bartleby's biography at the beginning, and the rumor of the Dead Letter Office in the sequel, it denotes a message quite suggestive in nature.

*Bartleby* begins with this preliminary statement by the narrator.

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. (156)

In the statement, the loss of Bartleby's biography is made a big issue, and the narrator tells us that the only way to retrieve any information pertaining to Bartleby is through his own account, or the sequel in the end. In the sequel, the narrator again tells us that he is "wholly unable to gratify" our curiosity "as to who Bartleby was, and what manner of life he led prior to the present narrator's making his acquaintance." Then, he offers us one "vague report" that "Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in administration" (200), and suggests that the gloomy business at the office must have heightened the "pallid hopelessness" of Bartleby and eventually unhinged his mind.

The sequel has baffled many critics, for it appears to serve so little to solve the mystery of Bartleby's origin and it is also so anticlimactic that it becomes hard for us to see any aesthetic necessity to it.<sup>5</sup> We must remember, however, that the narrator tells us that the "vague report" of the Dead Letter Office which "has not been without a certain strange suggestive interest to [him], however sad," saying "it may prove the same with some others" (200). If we are to trust the narrator, then, we would do better taking his words literally, assuming that the sequel is inserted as a hint to the missing personal history of Bartleby and the symbolic meaning of his existence.

It has been widely acknowledged that Bartleby's removal from his post in the Dead Letter Office is an allusion to Hawthorne's loss of his office at the customhouse "due to the change in administration"—an experience Hawthorne thoroughly utilized in his Introductory to *The Scarlet Letter*. At first the narrator's guess at the cause of Bartleby's illness or the implicit allusion to Hawthorne's loss of his office appears to be rather beside the point. When it is reexamined, however, in conjunction with the image of the "dead letters" burned in a fire, the association directly leads us to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. If Melville had the fate of Hester Prynne in his mind when he suggested the story of "Agatha" to Hawthorne, it is quite probable that he found a strong affinity between the two in their "great patience, & endurance, & resignedness" (Horth 232). Robertson, too, shows some qualities that strongly reminds us of Dimmesdale, as "he is a weak man, & his temptations . . . were strong" (Horth 234)



The similarity lies also in the structural framework of the two works. Examining the two works side by side, what strikes us most is the peculiar affinity between them in their narrative settings and the arrangement of various episodes. Both are told by a nameless narrator. A certain degree of difference exists, to be sure. In *Bartleby* the narrator tells us his own experience, while in *The Scarlet Letter* the original source is an ancient manuscript written by a man deceased long time ago. The two, however, are alike in that we receive a tale that has already been filtered through and reorganized by a narrator. More importantly, there are a number of episodes in *Bartleby* that seem to correspond to those in *Scarlet*, and only in conjunction with the latter, do the episodes, which at first seemed to be incongruous with the overall flow of the story-line and aesthetically unnecessary, come to hold significant meanings.

*The Scarlet Letter* begins with Hester's emergence from prison. The scene leads to her exclusion from the Puritan community, but it also marks the beginning of her new life with Pearl. *Bartleby*, on the other hand, ends with his imprisonment and eventual death. In his delusion, Dimmesdale sees a vision of Hester "leading along little Pearl, in her scarlet garb" (100), while in *Bartleby* the lawyer sees the vision of the "scrivener's pale form" in its "shivering winding sheet" (176). Chillingworth pushes aside the minister's vestment to find the evidence of the guilt on his chest. The lawyer, on the other hand, gropes in Bartleby's desk to find something that entirely alters his view of the man. Dimmesdale and Hester hold a secret meeting in the forest and decide to flee

to Europe. The lawyer, in his “confidential interview with the scrivener,” offers him five alternative jobs, the last of which is to go “as a companion to Europe, to entertain some young gentleman with [his] conversation” (194). His proposal, of course, meets with the clerk’s instant rejection. On Election Day, the Puritans celebrate the installation of the new governor, making it a public holiday, but for New Yorkers a mayoral election is nothing but an object of a bet. Dimmesdale joins the majestic procession headed by a musical band, armored soldiers and the town elders to deliver his last sermon. New Yorkers, on the other hand, witnesses a silent procession “headed by one of the constables arm in arm with Bartleby” file its way through . . . “the roaring thoroughfares,” while some of the compassionate and curious bystanders join the party (196). Hester in her later years receives occasional letters from Pearl which confirms the strong bond between the two, but the dead letters in *Bartleby* communicate none. What is interesting here is that these paired episodes seem to be carefully arranged to imply underlying thematic parallels, while, at the same time, presenting diametrically opposite artistic visions.<sup>6</sup>

The unique contrastive parallel inevitably reminds us of Waggoner’s comparison of *The Old Mans* and *The Piazza* and his conclusion that in spite of taking up the same subjects and themes, the two works reveal “the contrasting values of the civilized life and the natural or primitive life, and the relations between the real and the ideal, or Appearance and Reality” (132). His analysis brings one possibility to mind. Did Melville adopt the

same method of idiosyncratic juxtaposition when he composed *Bartleby*? The idea seems quite plausible when we consider how carefully these episodes are arranged.

Under this supposition, the line that hitherto seemed to be incomprehensible—"Dead Letters! Does it not sound like dead men?"—comes to hold a significant meaning. The peculiar association of Dead Letters with dead men inevitably reminds us of Pearl whose presence cuts a striking contrast to the "dead men." In *Scarlet Letter*, she is often depicted as a symbolic figure rather than an individual character. Impish and wild, Pearl is "the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life!" (74); a living symbol of "Sin" her parents wish to hide. Carefully examining her behavior, Chillingworth makes a remark: "A strange child! It is easy to see the mother's part in her. Would it be beyond a philosopher's research . . . to analyze that child's nature, and, from its make and mould, to give a shrewd guess at the father?" (80) While applying his cunning art to pry into the heart of Dimmesdale, the physician tries to decipher this "living hieroglyphic, in which was revealed the secret [her parents] so darkly sought to hide,—all written in this symbol,—all plainly manifest,—had there been a prophet or magician skilled to read the character of flame!" (140) Near the end of the story, Dimmesdale finally acknowledges Pearl as his own child, and with the recognition he unshackles her from the role as a living symbol of the scarlet letter. Shedding tears at her father's death, she shows a sign of humanity that promises "she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but

be a woman in it. Towards her mother, too, Pearl's errand as a messenger of anguish was all fulfilled" (173).

As a counterpart to Pearl, "the scarlet letter," Bartleby plays his role as "the dead letter," that is to say, the real message he carries fails to reach its destination, for "On errands of life, these letters speed to death" (200). If, however, we venture a guess about even a fragment of what was written in "the letter," it would make a great difference in our understanding, for just as Pearl's existence embodies the enigma of her parentage, Bartleby's lost history is intertwined with his genealogy. In the next section, we shall assume the role of Chillingworth to probe the narrator's glib story-telling, and infer the mysterious origin of Bartleby

### III Father and Son

Bartleby's mysterious identity and the cause of his strange behavior has long been disputed among critics. Leo Marx interprets Bartleby as the dissatisfied author himself (602); Richard J. Zolgar argues that Bartleby is suffering from schizophrenia (505); David Kuebrich says Bartleby's refusal to work is a response to impersonal, unequal, and exploitative working conditions (386); Barbara Foley explains that Bartleby is a portrait of the increasing alienation of labor in the rationalized capitalist economy (87); Donald Fiene calls Bartleby an "incarnation of Christ" (21). In conjunction with this chameleon-like figure, the lawyer has also been interpreted in various ways: as a god-like figure who tries to free the man from his estrangement; as an exploiter of laborers; as a paragon of capitalist society; or as a Judas figure.

Among these various interpretations, one widely accepted view is that there exists a peculiar bonding between the two that resembles that of father and son. Edwin Haviland Miller, for example, claims that the story is about the “familial bond between them” and the “antagonism of father and son” (Miller 264). A possibility, however, has never been argued that there exists a true blood relationship between the two, and with good reason. No clear statement or easily recognizable indication to that direction is in the work, except for a subtle hint in the preliminary statement and the sequel.

Although the lawyer professes his compassion for the pitiful man, suggesting an almost fatherly feeling toward him, he never forgets his position as his employer and his treatment of Bartleby never changes. When we look through the course of events in the story, we can see how consistent he is in his conduct. Outwardly, he wavers between his prudence and his conscience. Closely examined, however, he is persistent in his efforts, first, to press the scrivener into compliance, and later, to escape from this burden whom he calls a “millstone.” His conscience and Christian morality only serve as a temporary excuse for his inaction between his gingerly yet repeated attempts to control or dismiss Bartleby. We come to wonder, then, why a capable businessman, who boasts of his own “prudence” and “method,” dares not take a more decisive step to break through the deadlocked situation. He shows much more patience and tolerance than one would expect of an employer, but at the same time, his fear for the man and his wish to get rid of him cannot be disguised.

*Bartleby* is in many ways a bizarre story, and much of its enigmatic quality comes from the incongruities between the lawyer's explanation of the situation and the reactions he shows toward it. The setting of the story is entirely confined to Wall Street and its vicinity, the lawyer's professional battle-field. Though he deplors the irreparable loss of Bartleby's history, the lawyer himself never talks about his private life nor his personal history, except that he once worked for John Jacob Astor, his capitalist hero, and enjoyed the "pleasantly remunerative" (157) post of Master of Chancery for a few years. Through his narration, however, we learn a good deal about his character which indicates strong conformity to the Wall Street practices, its materialistic and utilitarian thinking. The problem here is many of his actions do not fit nicely into his character, nor can we find sufficient explanation for them.

That does not mean, however, we should not trust the man entirely. After all he is the only person from whom we can derive anything about Bartleby, and in many ways he is quite frank about his state of mind. He makes a detailed account of his mental calculations in his dealings with Bartleby and the emotional agitations he experiences in the process, and shows no hesitation in revealing information that reflects negatively on himself. Though he sometimes embellishes his tale with some exaggerations, his usual diction is rather sedate and well-chosen, which indicates his "methodical" thinking, and at some crucial moments, reveals surprising discernment.

Dan McCall points out, saying, "Bartleby annoys the other

characters, and sometimes he provokes them to fury, but he does not haunt them. Bartleby haunts only the narrator. Ghosts do not waste their time on people who cannot see them; ghosts haunt only the people who deserve them (McCall 152).” And He is haunted. The narrator is a man of the world, in his ripe age, sagacious in many ways, clever in manipulating others to his advantage. Then why does he act so out of common? Why is he so startled when he first hears Bartleby’s “I would prefer not”? And why does he grow nervous every time the phrase is repeated, until at last he trembles to think that “[his] contact with the scrivener has seriously affected [him] in a mental way?” (180) When Bartleby first refuses his order, the lawyer himself tells us that if it was with any other man he would “thrust him ignominiously” from his presence. Why couldn’t he do the same with Bartleby, a man he calls a “penniless wight” (172)? He tells us “there is something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner touched and disconcerted me,” (167) and he tries to probe into his past. Why? The lawyer has professed to be a man of utilitarian thinking who judges people on the basis of whether they are useful to him. He attributes the irritable behavior of Turkey and Nippers to alcohol and indigestion and shows no further concern. As the story goes on, his mental agitation becomes more and more discernible, until he acts like a neurotically disturbed man in his flight from Bartleby. All for a pallid cadaverous clerk who adamantly refuses his request? What is really haunting him?

If we are to fill in the gap and nail down the cause of this

incongruity, we must reexamine the lawyer's account from the beginning to the end, this time, on the supposition we have argued so far: *Bartleby* is a story whose subjects and themes show striking parallels with those of *The Scarlet Letter*, but they are arranged in a way so that they stand in complete contrast to their counterparts. Like a reversed film or mirror writing, everything must be subverted and overturned.

The underlying theme of *Scarlet* is man's concealment of his own sin and his final decision to make it open and submit directly to God. The decision leads him to the public acknowledgement of his relationship with Hester and Pearl. In *Bartleby*, then, he must tread the opposite course. By denying the truth, he will keep his station in "the cool tranquility of a snug retreat" (156). The concealment necessitates him to erase the existence of the woman and her child from his narrative. Someone has to show up, however, for the story to begin.

One day in summer, in answer to his advertisement, a scrivener appears before him—"pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn." His incessant industry and sedate manner greatly satisfies his employer, until one day, "in a flute-like tone," he replies, "I would prefer not to." The lawyer's reaction is that of disbelief: "I sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying my stunned faculties" (165). The clerk utters the word again, and it unnerves him further: "'Prefer not to', echoed I [the lawyer], rising in high excitement . . . What do you mean? Are you moon-struck?" When the copyist utters the line for the third time, the lawyer "looks at him steadfastly." "Gazing at him awhile," he ruminates, "This is very strange" (166). After



the first refusal, Bartleby repeatedly uses the phrase, making the lawyer more and more uneasy.

There has been much speculation on the mysterious connotation of the line. To “prefer” something, one must have an alternative, so it may well be that it reveals Bartleby’s desire to be free from any imperative command that leaves him with no other choice. The wording also becomes his “eminently decorous” (175) personality. But why does it inflict such a severe blow on the lawyer? If he was only shocked by the idea that a petty clerk should decline his request, he would have demanded due explanation from him. The lawyer, however, just retreats into silence. The line sounds somewhat feminine, which may provide something of a clue to its meaning. Intuition tells me that if it is Bartleby’s favorite phrase, it could also be his mother’s. If the lawyer was intimate with Bartleby’s mother and it was the very words the woman used repeatedly—not only in front of her son, but also his “father”—, then the lawyer’s “trepidation” at hearing the line becomes explicable. What I am suggesting is a pure supposition, to be sure, but explains so conveniently why the words produce such a strange effect on him.

The assumption brings to our mind yet another meaning the word carries. Irritated by Bartleby’s obstinacy, Nippers yells, “I’d *prefer* him” (180). Here he is using the word in the context which is more becoming to his profession. In the legal vein, to “prefer” charges against someone is to accuse him formerly of a crime so he could be brought to justice. Of course, when Nippers yells “I’d *prefer* him,” what he means by it is he’d *accuse* the scrivener of neglect

of duty. The lawyer, however, must have noticed the dual significations of the word and realized that the phrase—"I would prefer not."—could also imply "I would not *accuse* (you for what you've done)." He suddenly becomes aware that he and his clerks "got into the way of involuntary using this word 'prefer' upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions." The blow it inflicts on him is vivid: "I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way" (180). He never speaks the true cause of his distraction, but just as the saying goes: "effect speaks, the tongue needs not."

Once we accept the supposition that what is tormenting the man is his sense of guilt and fear of exposure, the irrational behavior he shows afterwards becomes quite explicable. While searching the clerk's desk, the lawyer finds his savings in an old bandanna handkerchief. Perhaps, it was the handkerchief that truly struck him, not the amount of the money inside, for immediately after the discovery, he resolves to ask Bartleby his personal history, while at the same time making up his mind to quit him. By this time, however, he must have come to hold a fairly strong suspicion concerning Bartleby's identity. The clerk refuses to reveal his past, but the lawyer does not dismiss him, because he feels "something superstitious knocking at his heart," forbidding him to carry out his purpose (179).

Then the young man announces he has given up copying, leaving the lawyer no choice but to dismiss him. The procedure, however, must be carried out in "perfect quietness": "no vulgar bullying, no bravado of any sort, no choleric hectoring, and

striding to and fro across the apartment, jerking out vehement commands for Bartleby to bundle himself off with his beggarly traps" (184). Such conduct could immensely mortify the clerk. If the man is indeed his son, and spills it out in public in his resentment, it would prove disastrous to him.

Therefore, even when he is actually exasperated with Bartleby's obstinacy, feeling almost a murderous urge, he thinks it but prudent to check himself "from further demonstrations" (187). Some kind of explanation, however, must be given for his faint-hearted attitude toward his clerk. He scampers through two books of essays—"Edwards on the Will" and "Priestley on Necessity."

Gradually I slid into the persuasion that these troubles of mine touching the scrivener, had been all 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. Yes, Bartleby, stay there behind your screen, thought I; I shall persecute you no more; you are harmless and noiseless as any of these old chairs; in short, I never feel so private as when I know you are here. (188-89)

The statement poured out in a tone of mock preaching is hilarious that even Dimmesdale would burst out in laughter (or he may swoon for that matter). The passage may have been inserted as a mockery of Dimmesdale's sermon, for in *The Scarlet Letter*, the Calvinistic theory of predestination lies heavily under the minister's desperate search for salvation. The lawyer's words, however, may also imply some secret motive. He claims his decision to keep

Bartleby is based on his belief in providence and philanthropy, but he also says “I never feel so private as when I know you are here.” As long as he keeps the clerk concealed behind the screen, then at least, he can keep a good eye on him so that the man would not divulge the truth.

In spite of the lawyer’s effort to keep up appearances, “a whisper of wonder” begins to run around concerning “the strange creature” he keeps at his office. He does not tell us the actual contents of “the unsolicited and uncharitable remarks” obtruded upon him, but the lawyer regards them with serious alarm, as being capable of “scandalizing [his] professional reputation” (190). As his worries grow, he even starts fancying that the clerk may “claim possession of [his] office by right of his perpetual occupancy” (190). The lawyer’s “dark anticipations” sounds outrageous, but if it came from his fear that Bartleby may claim his inheritance as his offspring, it is quite understandable. He again tries to persuade his clerk, but when it becomes clear that “this intolerable incubus” prefers to “cling” to him, he resolves to abandon him and his office altogether.

His plan seems to work at first. After a short while, however, the landlord and the tenants of the former premises show up at his new office, and demand that he remove Bartleby. The lawyer persists Bartleby is “nothing” to him (193), but in vain. They hold him to “the terrible account,” and one of them even threatens to “expose” the matter in the papers (193). If “the matter” were only about dismissing a worker who goes on strike without any comprehensible reason, what employer need be afraid of exposure?

Perceiving the devastating effect it could have on him, however, the lawyer acquiesces to hold “a confidential interview” (193) with the scrivener. He again tries to persuade Bartleby, first offering some other jobs, then offering his dwelling as a substitute place of abode until they “can conclude upon some convenient arrangement” (195). When his every effort fails, the lawyer takes a flight from the building, and fearful of “being again hunted out by the incensed landlord and his exasperated tenants” (195), takes refuge in his carriage wandering about “the upper part of the town and through the suburbs (195).” A few days after, on his return to his office, the lawyer receives the notice that Bartleby was removed to the Tombs as a vagrant. He is indignant at first, but on consideration, “almost” approves the decision. The clerk being entombed in the jail, he would be at last “safe” from any further reproach.

#### IV Husband and Wife

It is Patricia Barber who first suggested the experimental application of gender-exchange to *Bartleby*. In her “modest exercise” of the gender change “to ‘write’ Miss Bartleby’s story,” Barber testifies that she has to do “no more to Melville’s version than change ‘man’ to ‘woman’ or ‘lady,’ alter the pronouns and keep everything else the same,” and observes that “one of the most striking aspects about the sex-changed story is how gracefully it works,” for it remains a story “about affluent complacency shaken by passive, irrational refusal.” She also points out that by “the nature of his mysterious ailment,” Bartleby is “so

devalitized, so unerotic, that he becomes for us essentially sexless” (Barber 219).

Her observation is quite suggestive when we try to determine the nature of the relationship between the lawyer and Bartleby. The day the lawyer stops by his office and surveys the office room the young man made his perpetual abode. “Presentiments of strange discoveries” seize him and he sees the vision: “The scrivener’s pale form appeared to me laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding sheet” (176). The sight of the young man, not in his usual suites, but in shirt sleeves, may have made the lawyer keenly aware of his resemblance to someone—someone who is probably dead and gone. Throughout the story, Bartleby is presented as a pale, morbid, cadaverous gentleman—an apparition-like figure. The lawyer, moreover, often mentions the unique qualities in Bartleby—his “wonderful mildness” which disarms and unmans him (174) and his “austere reserve” that awes him into his tame compliance (177). Their strange effects on the lawyer seem peculiar at first, but if we imagine that the young man bears resemblance to his deceased mother, everything becomes quite explicable.

Once we accept the idea that Bartleby reflects his mother in the lawyer’s mind, their confrontation comes to take on a new aspect. In his diction, he sounds like a sedate congenial person. During his desperate confrontation with Bartleby, however, the lawyer remembers the Colt-Adams case that shook the city of New York in 1841. John C. Colt, brother of the famous inventor of firearms, Samuel Colt, murdered a printer named Samuel Adams. In his

effort to cover up the crime, Colt stuffed the body into a packing crate and tried to ship it to New Orleans but was caught and convicted of murder (Dillingham 37-38). Ruminating on the notorious case, the lawyer confesses that the “old Adam of resentment” of the murderer, rising in himself and tempting him to do the same with Bartleby. It is often suggested that through the Colt-Adams case Melville is alluding to the fratricide of Cain and Abel. The lawyer, however, never says that the “old *Cain* of resentment” arose in him but *Adam*, and if there is anyone Adam had reason to hold in resentment, that person would be his wife.

There is another instance of suggestive implication when the lawyer, in his deep frustration, makes an unmistakable allusion to Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Black Cat* (1843), saying he would let Bartleby “live and die [in his office] and then mason up his remains in the wall” (190). The lawyer’s specific reference to the contemporary murder case and well-known mystery reflects the vivid atmosphere of the time, but it also indicates the intensity of his resentment, the serious nature of their confrontation on the verge of violence, and lastly and most importantly, his tacit desire to conceal his guilt.

William B. Dillingham points out that the lawyer is a man of “method,” who likes to follow the methodical pattern he sets and repeats it again and again (Dillingham 18-55). During the course of the event, he follows the same pattern of action. At first, he continuously strives to pressure the clerk into compliance—persuading him, coaxing him, and even menacing him with force by “*incautiously* rousing Turkey’s combativeness after

dinner” (171). When he realizes, however, that Bartleby is not only uncooperative and thus useless to him, but also destructive of his reputation, then, he repeatedly tries to quit him under the disguise of “perfect quietness.” Every time he fails, he seems to waver in his decision and rationalize his retreat by bringing up the clerk’s usefulness or the principle of charity. The overall course of action he takes, however, is surprisingly repetitive and lackluster. If this is the normative behavioral pattern in his professional life on Wall Street, it could well be that he follows the same pattern in his private life, too.

The repetitive behavioral pattern is also noticeable in Bartleby, mainly in his monotonous answer: “I would prefer not to.” The clerk seems to share some other traits in his “father.” The lawyer boasts his “method,” and credits himself as an “eminently safe” man. He also assures that he has “a singular confidence” in Bartleby’s honesty, and feels his most precious papers “perfectly safe” in his hands (173). The lawyer also prizes his “method,” and when he inspects Bartleby’s desk, he finds everything inside is “methodically arranged” (176).

If Bartleby inherited this safe and methodical behavioral pattern from his father, his mother would be the source of other qualities in him—viz. his quiet but resilient qualities which inevitably remind us of Melville’s description of “Agatha.” And these are the very qualities that chafe the lawyer’s nerves. Recalling the irritating nature of Bartleby’s “passiveness,” he says, “I feel strangely goaded on to encounter him in new opposition, to elicit some angry spark from him answerable to my own” (170). If these



qualities in Bartleby are reminiscent of his mother, as the lawyer's allusion to "old Adam of resentment" and *The Black Cat* seems to suggest, then, we can guess what their relationship might have been like.

In their confrontation, then, Bartleby takes the position where his mother stood, and as a "copyist," he copies his "mother's" words and recreates the confrontation that once took place. At this point, we are made to realize that there exists a close resemblance between the pattern of their confrontation and that of the tragic relationships in classical romance—starting from assiduous persuasion, turning into disagreement, and then ending in inevitable separation or death. It is a typical storyline, to be sure, but when it is represented by a young cadaverous scrivener through his monotonous words and actions, in Wall Street, a place remotest from any kind of love or sexuality, its mimetic effect is nothing but painful.

## V Life and Death

As long as their confrontation remains to be the reenactment of the former one, failure is inevitable. As the time goes by, Bartleby gradually recedes to his dead-wall reveries and is eventually removed to the Tombs, while the lawyer keeps his silence. In the beginning, he speaks profusely in a good humor, creating laughter with his sanguine jokes. Later he expresses his pity for the poor clerk, and flaunts his philanthropic passion. But that is all on the superficial level. When it comes to revealing his true emotion and giving recognition to his "son," he is as silent as a stone. There is

just one time he seems to be almost overcome by his emotion. Just before leaving his old office, the lawyer turns around as if he is restrained by something.

I re-entered, with my hand in my pocket—and—and my heart in my mouth. “Good-bye, Bartleby; I am going—good-bye, and God some way bless you; and take that,” slipping something in his hand. But it dropped upon the floor, and then,—strange to say I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of (191-92).

At the most critical moment, however, his faculty of speech somehow seems to desert him, and he resorts to the only way he knows to show his good will.

What kind of emotions Bartleby harbored in his heart—whether it was resentment against the lawyer, or silent prayer for his acknowledgement, or if we should just take him as a symbolic figure—, it is hard to determine. When the lawyer pays him a visit in prison, Bartleby refuses him, saying “I know you . . . and I want nothing to say to you” (197). His word seems to imply some kind of resentment, but not absolutely. He never speaks of it. We could surmise, however, what the lawyer guessed. At the end of the story, the lawyer finds Bartleby in the heart of the Tombs, “his knees drawn up, and lying on his side,” like a fetus in his mother’s womb. Closing the eyes of the dead man, the lawyer murmurs, “With kings and counselors” (199). As pointed out by many critics, the words are quoted from *Job* in the Bible. Deprived of his offspring and fortune, in midst of grief and

anguish, and yet unable to let out his resentment against God, the Father, Job bewails the day he was born:

Why died I not from the womb? *Why* did I *not* give up the ghost when I came out of the belly? Why did the knees prevent me? Or why the breasts that I should suck? For now should I have lain still and been quiet, I should have slept: then had I been at rest, with kings and counselors of the earth, which built desolate places for themselves; or with princes that had gold, who filled their houses with silver: or as a hidden untimely birth I had not been; as infants *which* never saw light. There the wicked cease *from* troubling; and there the weary be at rest. *There* the prisoners rest together; they hear not the voice of the oppressor. The small and great are there; and the servant *is* free from his master. (Job 3:11-19)

The death image that permeates the *Bartleby's* Wall Street cuts a striking contrast to that of Hester and her child when they first emerge from the prison to be placed on the scaffold for all the town to see. From that day on, they become the living symbol of sin, but on the other hand, it offers Hester an opportunity to place herself in a unique position. Outside the rigid confinement of the Puritan community, leading a solitary life with Pearl, quietly yet assuredly she transforms herself into another being, playing a pivotal role in rescuing Dimmesdale from his self-deceptive torture. Silent but resilient, her physical presence with flesh and blood never loses its psychological magnitude, imbuing her world with the sense of life.

This may have been the very reason why Melville decided to erase the presence of "Agatha" from his story. By removing

women from his work, he created a world void of regenerative power. Ghostly and cadaverous, Bartleby never evolves into a full human being, and on the empty space his mother left, big stony walls rise high. Michael Gilmore points out the significant roles of the walls and the partitions in the story, and suggests that the lawyer's office separated into small cells, not only anticipates "Bartleby's eventual immurement in the Tombs," but also implies that "for the scriveners and their employer everyday life has come to resemble life inside prison." (Gilmore 132-33) The day Bartleby is incorporated into the chambers, the lawyer places the scrivener behind "a high green folding screen" to "isolate [him] from [his] sight" (164), and from there he is transferred to the Tombs, the very heart of prison. With his imprisonment in the Tombs and his eventual death, the secret of his identity is buried deep in perfect concealment, never to be discovered.

### Conclusion

Ironically it is in the inmost recesses of the prison that the lawyer encounters a sign of life.

The yard was entirely quiet. It was not accessible to the common prisoners. The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sound behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by the birds, had sprung. (199)

Almost like a divine miracle, the seed pierces through the thick walls of Tombs, reaching its utmost depth, springing up into life as if to prove its regenerative power. Melville's allusion to Jesus' parable of the seed here strongly reminds us of the letter Melville wrote to Hawthorne in June 1851, in which he likened himself to a seed: "I am like one of those seeds taken out of the Egyptian Pyramids, which, after being three thousand years a seed & nothing but a seed, being planted in English soil, it developed itself, grew to greenness, and then fell to mould" (Horth 193).

Here a notion strikes us. Under the light of the parable that likens man to a seed, the green turf in the prison yard could be seen as a symbol of spiritual rebirth that inspire a dead man bursting into life when he is planted in the right soil he is meant for. And if *Bartleby* is a letter and a seed at the same time, there could be no doubt as to whom it was meant for. When he was writing *Bartleby*, Melville must have expected Hawthorne to remember the various aspects of the "Agatha" story they discussed together, and he must have expected Hawthorne to catch the allusions to *Scarlet* in his work. In other words, the author is challenging his beloved friend to construe the true origin and meaning of *Bartleby* by deciphering the lawyer's account and fishing up necessary information pertaining *Bartleby's* personal history. In case he would fail to do so, he prepared an additional hint in the sequel, so that he would be able to go back to the beginning and try again.

*The Scarlet Letter* begins with the discovery of an old manuscript by a certain surveyor deceased a long time ago. Based on just a

few pages of the document, the narrator expands and reconstructs the whole story in his imagination. Melville must have expected that if Hawthorne retains his regenerative power of imagination, he could do the same with *Bartleby*. As “a seed & nothing but a seed,” Bartleby could appear as hard and silent as the plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero that the lawyer owns, but planted in a right man’s heart and mind, a friend he truly worshiped, the dead man would regain his life and start speaking. And it is only through his regeneration, through his encounter with the joy and pain of life, could a man truly enter the mysterious cycle where life properly meets death.

#### Notes

- 1 Its original title in the magazine was *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*. The title was shortened when it was later reprinted in his collection of short stories, *The Piazza Tales*. (Newman 20).
- 2 The biographical background of this missing manuscript is given a detailed account by Hershel Parker (1-16).
- 3 According to the lawyer’s account, Robertson in his later year was “a very jealous suspicious man—That when a person called at his house he would never enter the room till he knew who it was & “all about him” (Horth 624).
- 4 McCall Dan, *The Silence of Bartleby* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989). All the references to this work will be cited in parenthesis and correspond to this edition.
- 5 I agree with Sheila Post-Lauria that the sequel appears to be the “sentimentalist retreat of the narrator.” (5)
- 6 Quite interestingly, in three of the short stories he later composed — *The Two Temples* (composed in 1854), *Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs* (1854), and *The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids* (1855) — , Melville adopts a similar method. In these stories,

which Dillingham specifically calls “*bipartite stories*” (Dillingham 8), he juxtaposes two contrasting episodes to make up one story. In each story, a nameless narrator appears, and he tells us what he witnessed in two places that stand in striking contrast to each other. Each episode serves to complement its counterpart, endowing the story with a full psychological impact, and in the case of the above stories, shedding light on the bleak reality of class segregation.

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