Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

Like some of the other stories he published following the critical and popular failure of his novel *Pierre* (1852), Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” is an enigmatic, philosophically rich tale concerning, among other things, the nature of sympathy, the opacity of other humans, and the way antebellum social conditions exacerbated questions concerning the spiritual equality of humankind. Along with “Benito Cereno” and the posthumously published *Billy Budd*, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” remains one of Melville’s most famous shorter works, a story that has been understood through a variety of frames, some focusing on the narrator, others on Bartleby, and some on the context, which the subtitle emphasizes: “A Story of Wall-Street.”

Like “Benito Cereno,” “Bartleby” first appeared in *Putnam’s Magazine* (in 1853) and later in the collection *The Piazza Tales* (1856). At the center of the story is the narrator’s—and the reader’s—attempt to make sense of Bartleby. Critics have suggested a number of ways to read the character—as a Christ-like figure (the narrator’s Peter-like refusal of Bartleby three times towards the close), as a stand-in for a kind of Thoreauvian nonviolent resistance, as a figure of the alienated artist (Bartleby is paid to write monotonous tracts; Melville felt trapped by a literary marketplace that would not accept what he wanted to write); as a representative of the exploited working classes of the antebellum era; as an existentialist comment on the utter meaninglessness of life. Other readers have emphasized Bartleby as a figure of inscrutability, of the nature of language or existence itself as finally open to interpretation in a way that cannot ever be fully settled. Equal attention has been expended on judging the narrator and the story’s judgment of his behavior. While many readers become frustrated with his willingness to put up with the poor working habits of his employees, some admire his sympathy for a man who, to a large extent, refuses that sympathy. The most dominant strain in recent academic criticism, however, has foregrounded the context of antebellum capitalism in contending that the story seeks to demonstrate how the narrator, despite his apparent forbearance and sympathy, remains entrapped in an economic logic that precludes his sympathy having any real effect. The story simultaneously supports our tendency to identify with the narrator and to judge him for not acting more forcefully towards his workers. As such, it works to make us feel, uncomfortably, our own complicity with the forces of market capitalism. At the same time, however, while some contextualizing readings of the story attempt to render Bartleby legible, the story seems to warn, as “Benito Cereno” does in the context of slavery, against any easy form of condescension or sympathy as yet another form of instituting power distinctions.

The story emphasizes the centrality of the narrator’s relationship to his workers through the long set up that precedes the introduction of Bartleby. In these pages, the narrator characterizes himself as “an eminently safe man,” who looks for the “easiest way of life.” This characterization helps to explain his response—or lack of response—to his employees, Turkey, who is drunk every afternoon, Nippers, who seems unable to work well in the morning, and Ginger Nut, who serves merely as an errand boy. The
narrator, it seems, is more than willing to overlook their periods of poor work in order to avoid any confrontation or conflict. At the same time, however, Melville hints that the narrator is motivated by far more than just his desire to avoid conflict. The narrator focuses attention on John Jacob Astor, the richest man in the U.S. during the 1840s who owned more of Manhattan than anyone else and a man often associated with the brutal drive for wealth. Further, the narrator digresses to protest the abolition of the Master of Chancery, a position requiring little work while being “very pleasantly remunerative.” The Master of Chancery was a court position that oversaw settling disputes over estates, thus further emphasizing the narrator’s position within legal proceedings involving wealth and property. As much as the narrator is concerned with living a life of ease, he is also considerably interested in wealth and property. At the same time, though, he wants to see himself both as this employees’ fellow worker and as their superior. He diagnoses Nippers’ main problem as a “diseased ambition” to become a lawyer himself, and, after taking Ginger Nut in as a student of law, he omits to teach him anything at all. These details hint at his desire to remain above this employees, as does his condescension towards Turkey when giving him a used coat, his comments about Turkey’s insolence after he receives the coat, and his warm reception to Turkey saying “with submission, sir.” The narrator reveals his other side—his desire to embrace an American feeling of equality—through his strong response to Turkey’s appeal to his “fellow-feeling” when Turkey refuses to give up working on Saturday afternoons.

Before Bartleby is even introduced, then, Melville has begun to characterize the narrator as a man driven by contradictory impulses, his desire to maintain and gain wealth at odds with his desire for ease, his need to be recognized as a superior in tension with his need to see himself as sympathetic and not as a tyrant. These different desires fuse in his response to Bartleby, with whose initial work he would “have been quite delighted . . . had he been cheerfully industrious.” This reaction suggests that the narrator wants more than just a good worker; he wants a worker who seems to be happy in his place. As the story continues and Bartleby begins to refuse to work, the narrator’s desire to be sympathetic and thus to feel good about himself increasingly comes into conflict with his sense of his rights as an owner and employer. He repeatedly puts off acting more forcefully towards Bartleby by reminding himself of how he will be repaid—with Melville emphasizing the financial metaphors—through a feeling of self-satisfaction: “Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange wilfulness [sic], will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience.” At the same time, he is pulled—as we, readers, most likely are also—by expectations or assumptions about the employer’s superiority to his workers and his rights to his property, as when he confronts Bartleby about his rights to stay in the office: “What earthly right have you to stay here? Do you pay any rent? Do you pay any taxes? Or is this property yours?” The adjective “earthly” may be of utmost importance, as one way to read the story is in terms of the conflict between Christian morality and a capitalist system of property rights and wage labor. Bartleby may, indeed, have no “earthly” right to remain in the office, yet the narrator still feels “a fraternal” bond with Bartleby as “sons of Adam” and “something superstitious knocking at my heart, and
forbidding me to carry out” his purpose of dismissing Bartleby. In the end, however, “business tyrannized over all other considerations” for the narrator. From a certain Christian point of view, the narrator’s conscience tells him to act with complete selflessness, yet even his sympathy is couched in terms of “mere self-interest.”

Readings that emphasize the story’s apparent critique of wage relationships in the market economy of antebellum New York often have less to say about Bartleby than about the narrator. While some critics have attempted to locate a nascent working-class consciousness in the title character, his refusal to provide any reason for not working (beyond enigmatically asking the narrator “Do you not see the reason for yourself?”) offers little in the way of an articulated position concerning the inequity of social and economic relations. On the other hand, however, while still somewhat oblique, Melville’s “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” more directly attacks the dependence of an elite group of lawyers (the bachelors) and their lavish lifestyle on the enervating and dehumanizing labor of others (the maids working in a paper factory). Read as parallel texts, the two stories emphasize Melville’s concern with social inequality and the way that a certain kind of sympathy helped to assuage the feelings of guilt surrounding that inequality. Through the contrast between the narrator’s original workers, towards whom he could offer condescending comments and diagnoses, and Bartleby, who provides little ground for identification or sympathy, “Bartleby” comes much closer to “Benito Cereno” and its treatment of Babo. Bartleby, like Babo, stands as a much tougher test of our willingness to accept others on their own terms, as neither provides us—or the characters who attempt to sympathize with them in the stories—with a clear sense of their own desires, motives, or feelings. We must accept them as they are, the stories seems to suggest, or we, like the lawyer in “Bartleby” or Amasa Delano in “Benito Cereno,” will simply project our own preconceived views on them.