

# Bartleby the Absurd

ETHEL F. CORNWELL, *Shepherd College*

Those who have read *Moby Dick* have seen the way Ahab anticipates the modern hero in his existential anguish, in his protest against man's condition and man's fate, his demand for reasons, his rage against finding himself a personality "in the midst of the personified *impersonal*," a rational being at the mercy of irrational forces he can neither understand nor control.<sup>1</sup> And in "Bartleby the Scrivener," Melville once again runs ahead of his time, for Bartleby is a metaphysical rebel exhibiting what Camus has called "an absurd sensitivity"—that is, an awareness of the "absurd."<sup>2</sup>

"There is but one truly serious philosophical problem," says Camus, "and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."<sup>3</sup> Life is a habit that one continues unthinkingly until weariness sets in and the mind suddenly asks *why*. Why continue? Why bother? At this point, "the chain of daily gestures is broken," says Camus. "What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery."<sup>4</sup>

When we examine "Bartleby the Scrivener," the scrivener's "absurd sensitivity" and the motives for his rejection of life become clear. There is no overt explanation for Bartleby's negation, of course, for the story is told by an elderly lawyer who is incapable of seeing himself as the reader does, and too lacking in perception, too wrapt up in his own concerns to understand Bartleby's. As "an eminently *safe* man"<sup>5</sup> who likes to avoid trouble, one congenitally disposed to taking the easy way out, he finds it more convenient to duck the issue, until Bartleby's intransigence finally makes that impossible, and forces him to act. And in the end he still does not quite understand what has happened, nor why. But the clues are there; Melville has seen to that. To understand Bartleby, we first need to look at the two minor characters who set him up, Turkey and Nippers, and the conditions under which they work, for the other two copyists offer both a contrast to Bartleby (accepting conditions he rejects), and a clue to his behavior.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See *Moby Dick*, ed. Alfred Kazin (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1956), p. 384. Italics mine. It is worth noting that *Moby Dick* was published in 1851 and "Bartleby" first appeared in *Putnam's* magazine in 1853, two years after Melville's first modern rebel.

<sup>2</sup>See *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1959), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup>*Five Tales by Herman Melville*, introd. by James H. Pickering (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1967), p. 4. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

<sup>6</sup>Melville used a similar device in *Moby Dick*, carefully delineating the characters of the first, second, and third mates so that their ordinary traits and conventional attitudes highlight all that is different about Ahab, making the reader aware that this is *not* an ordinary being but a being as above the ordinary as the whale he pursues.

Before introducing the reader to *Bartleby*, the narrator describes his other employees and the law chambers they work in, telling us more than he knows, admitting that the windows at one end of his Wall Street office face a skylight shaft, offering a view that "might have been considered rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call 'life'" (p. 4). The other end "commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade; which wall required no spy-glass to bring out its lurking beauties, but, for the benefit of all near-sighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my window-panes" (pp. 4-5).

In other words, the surroundings are dull and depressing; the work is also. Every day, six long days a week, the clerks must copy word-for-word, in laborious longhand, tedious, complicated law documents, which are also written in longhand—an eye strain to say the least. By the lawyer's own admission, it is "a dry, husky sort of business" (p. 10). And once a copy has been made, it must be verified, one of the clerks reading from the copy, word-for-word, while another follows him on the original. "It is a very dull, wearisome, and lethargic affair," concedes the narrator. "I can readily imagine that, to some sanguine temperaments, it would be altogether intolerable" (p. 11).

When we see how Turkey and Nippers react to the deadly tedium of their work, *Bartleby's* behavior becomes less puzzling. Turkey is a "short, pousy Englishman" about the age of the narrator, "somewhere not far from sixty" (p. 5). In the morning he is a reliable clerk, polite, quick, and steady. But after twelve o'clock, he grows irritable and impatient, spilling ink blots on his papers; if provoked, he can be insolent. And some afternoons, the narrator tells us, he went further: "He made an unpleasant racket with his chair; spilled his sand box; in mending his pens, impatiently split them all to pieces, and threw them on the floor in a sudden passion; stood up, and leaned over his table, boxing his papers about in a most indecorous manner" (p. 6). Understandably, he is always worse on Saturdays, the sixth day of the long workweek; but when his employer suggests that, because of his advancing age, it might be wise for him to go home after his noon dinner on Saturdays, he refuses—possibly because he does not want to risk his position as the lawyer's "right-hand man" (p. 6), or possibly because he cannot afford the time off.<sup>7</sup> Considering his morning services valuable, the narrator solves the problem by making the most of his skills in the morning and giving him less important papers in the afternoon, when he is careless about how much ink his pen picks up from the inkstand and, therefore, more likely to make blots.

Nippers, a young man of twenty-five, operates on a reverse schedule; he is calm and polite in the afternoon, but irritable and testy in the morning, grinding his teeth over his mistakes and endlessly adjusting the height or angle of his table. "Though of a very ingenious mechanical turn, Nippers could never get his table to suit him. . . . If, for the sake of easing his back, he brought the table lid at a sharp angle well up towards his chin, and wrote there like a man using the steep roof of a Dutch house for his desk, then he declared that it stopped the circulation in his arms. If now he lowered the table to his waistbands, and stooped over it in writing, then there was a sore aching in his back" (pp. 7-8). The narrator's conclusion is that Nippers did not know what he wanted. "Or, if he wanted anything, it was to be rid of a scrivener's table altogether" (p. 8). The latter is the more likely, for Nippers has shown "a certain impatience of the duties of a mere copyist" and ambitiously attempts odd jobs on the side, sometimes "the original drawing up of legal documents," which the lawyer jealously regards as an encroachment of his own territory, "an unwarrantable usurpation of strictly professional affairs" (p. 7).

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<sup>7</sup>Obviously Turkey is not highly paid. See the reference to his "so small an income" (p. 8).

The narrator attributes Nippers's testiness to indigestion, but *his* views, we soon see, are not always to be trusted. After all, he is *not* an omniscient narrator but a biased observer primarily interested in his own needs and his own feelings—and a master at self-deception; this leads to a myopic view of his employees, and to certain distortions and misinterpretations of events. Why, for example, would Nippers suffer indigestion after his morning breakfast and not after his noon dinner, the heavier meal? Either unable or unwilling to see the *real* cause of Nippers's morning mood, the narrator blames it on indigestion (an easy "out," like the many rationalizations he makes regarding his own actions—or the lack of them). But Melville has supplied us with *other* possible answers to the scriveners' changing moods, making quite a point of the age difference between them, which, in addition to their different temperaments, may explain not only the variations in their morning/afternoon behavior, but also their opposite reactions to whatever they drink with their midday meal.

The older man starts out well, so well that the narrator values his services and resolves not to lose them, conceding that Turkey is "the civilest, nay, the blandest and most *reverential* of men in the morning" (p. 6; italics mine). In fact, Turkey's customary mode of address is "with submission, sir." But at dinner he presumably drinks more wine than his age and temperament can tolerate and, by afternoon, alcohol and fatigue undermine his self-control, his customary submission, and his repressed feelings about his job begin to show.<sup>8</sup> Nippers, on the other hand, because he is younger, less willing to accept the tedium and the physical confinement of his job, begins the day full of resentment and needs a few hours work—and perhaps a beer at noon—to settle him down. For, though described as "a temperate young man" (p. 9), he is not averse to drinking beer with his dinner, according to Turkey, who insists that the beverage has a gentling effect (p. 17).

They are comic opposites, Turkey and Nippers, one waxing while the other wanes. Moreover, it is Turkey and Nippers who alert the reader to the nature of the job which Bartleby will now undertake, and it is noteworthy that one of the chief duties of the office boy is to fetch the ginger wafers and apples the two clerks munch on throughout the day, to relieve the strain and the tedium. It is also noteworthy that the employer/narrator hires Bartleby partly because he thinks that the young man, pale, neat, sedate, will be more tractable than Turkey and Nippers and might even have a beneficial effect on them. But he is wrong again. Though he works hard to begin with, Bartleby soon rebels—and in a way Turkey and Nippers would never have thought of, for, despite their superficial resistance, they are basically as conventional as the narrator in their acceptance of their world.

In the writing of "Bartleby," Melville was a more conscious craftsman than critics have sometimes been willing to credit. Not only does he use Turkey and Nippers to serve the functions discussed earlier and to offer comic relief in what would otherwise be a depressing tale, he also uses as narrator a man who is too dense to understand all the reader is expected to, and who is too afraid of creating a scene by throwing Bartleby out at the first sign of insubordination—as a stronger character would have done—thus ending the story before it had really begun. Functionally, the employer/narrator becomes all the more important

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<sup>8</sup>Just how much Turkey drinks remains a question. Since all the information received comes through biased sources, the reader must assess the reports for himself. Though Turkey sports "a lustrous face," which the narrator assumes is due to his "self-indulgent habits" (p. 8), and though Nippers observes that "Turkey's money went chiefly for red ink," meaning red wine (p. 8), there is nothing to tell us whether Turkey's presumed overindulgence occurs at noon, after hours, or at both. The fact is that he arrives sober each morning, his clothes smell of "eating-houses" (p. 8), not alcohol, and his afternoon behavior is *no* more violent than Nippers's in the morning.

when one realizes it is he who provokes Bartleby's final rebellion, and it is he who, taking it upon himself to examine the contents of Bartleby's desk during the clerk's absence, discovers that Bartleby has "a savings bank" (p. 22)—a fact which Melville deliberately introduces to prevent the reader from thinking that Bartleby's behavior is in any way motivated by a lack of funds. We are obliged to look further.

The narrator likes to think of himself as "a man of peace" and patience, a kind-hearted employer tolerantly overlooking his clerks' "eccentricities" (p. 6). But the reader sees him differently, for he not only fails to recognize the true nature of those eccentricities, he shows little regard for his employees as individuals with rights, needs—and possessions—of their own. And his tolerance is self-serving. He tolerates his clerks because they are useful to him and because he dislikes creating a scene about anything. Although he may be reluctant to stir up trouble or defy public opinion, he does not hesitate to take advantage of his position when he feels he may safely get away with it: taking the older clerk to task for the coats he wears, opening and closing the folding doors between the two rooms "according to [his] humor" (p. 11), and violating Bartleby's privacy with the excuse that "the desk is mine, and its contents, too" (p. 22).<sup>9</sup>

When the narrator's business increases, he is not satisfied with hiring another scrivener but also feels compelled to "push" the ones he has (p. 10). And once Bartleby arrives, he assigns him a corner on *his* side of the folding doors that separate his work area from that of the clerks, "so as to have this quiet man within easy call, in case any trifling thing was to be done" (p. 11). He places Bartleby's desk close to a small side window which allows *some* light but "no view at all," facing a brick wall not three feet away. To complete what he describes with incredible self-satisfaction as "a satisfactory arrangement" (satisfactory to whom?), the narrator encloses Bartleby's corner with "a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice"—thus ensuring his own privacy but isolating Bartleby from his colleagues (from all human company, in fact), while keeping him at the beck and call of his master (p. 11). The narrator's treatment of Bartleby is so unfeeling as to be barbarous, and, considering the narrator's earlier admissions about the wearisome nature of the job, it is no wonder that, recognizing in Bartleby's behavior an implied reproach, he has occasional twinges of conscience or that, despite his virtuous protestations, he feels some responsibility for what happens, and a subconscious fascination for the man who is the source of his guilt.

At first Bartleby does an enormous amount of work, "copying by sun-light and by candle-light" (what else is there to do in his forced isolation?); but he obviously takes no joy in his task, for he works "silently" and "mechanically" (p. 11). And when, on his third day there, he is "abruptly" asked to drop what he is doing and help verify someone else's copy (p. 12), he politely but firmly declines, to the consternation of his employer, who, in his "natural expectancy of instant compliance," had thought that Bartleby would "snatch" up the paper without delay (p. 12). Turkey's repeated "with submission, sir" gives us some idea of the kind of deference and obedience that is expected.<sup>10</sup> But Bartleby is *not* Turkey and, ignoring the manuscript thrust at him, continues with his own

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<sup>9</sup>Bartleby's is not the only desk he goes through, for in his description of Ginger Nut, the narrator mentions that his desk is little used. "Upon inspection," he informs us, "the drawer exhibited a great array of the shells of various sorts of nuts" (pp. 9-10; italics mine).

<sup>10</sup>The kind of deference the narrator is used to is vividly illustrated in an earlier episode when Turkey (in his post-noon carelessness he has moistened a ginger wafer and applied it as a seal) mollifies his irate employer with an "oriental" bow, informing him that he has used his own funds to buy some office stationery. See p. 10.

writing, leaving his non-plussed employer to seek help elsewhere. Nor will Bartleby join in a few days later when asked to help verify the four lengthy documents he himself has just completed. He would “prefer” not to. Bartleby’s behavior is an affront both to his employer, who accepts the rules of the game without question, and to his two colleagues, who, for all their eccentricities, end up playing the game also. Nippers (in his morning mood) suggests kicking him out of the office, and Turkey (post noon) is ready to give him a black eye, though he does suggest later that a quart of ale every day might set him straight, “enabling him to assist in examining his papers” (p. 25)—giving us a clue to his *own* motives for drinking.

But while the narrator is busy rationalizing his failure to take action, his inability to cope (reminding himself that Bartleby is “useful,” delaying a decision on the matter because of business pressures, etc.), Bartleby manages to draw a line between what he will and will not do. He *will* copy documents; he will *not* proofread, and he will *not* run errands. So long as he does his primary job well, the narrator finds it justifiable to humor him. After all, he is steady in his work, morning *and* afternoon, copying an extraordinary amount, and he is always *there*—the first at his desk in the morning, and the last at night. Then comes the Sunday when the narrator discovers that Bartleby has made his home in the office, refusing even to admit his employer (demanding privacy) until he has had time to make himself presentable. At first the narrator feels the “bond of a common humanity,” a “fraternal” sympathy, sentimentally bemoaning the poverty, loneliness, and solitude thus revealed (p. 21). He also recalls seeing Bartleby standing for long periods staring at the “dead brick wall” (p. 22). But as we soon learn (when the narrator examines Bartleby’s desk), poverty is *not* the problem; and Bartleby’s present solitude, we know, has been, if not created by, at least contributed to by the narrator himself. Moreover, it was he who faced Bartleby’s desk toward the brick wall. At any rate, the narrator’s “fraternal” feelings do not last. Finding the whole affair very upsetting, and seeking, as always, an easy way out, he convinces himself that Bartleby is suffering from an “innate and incurable disorder” of the soul and is, therefore, beyond reach. That being so, it is only “common sense” to rid himself of pity, when pity is useless, and to rid himself of Bartleby as well. He decides to tell the scrivener that his services are no longer needed, “but that if in any other way I could assist him, I would be happy to do so” (p. 23). He would even be willing (*especially* willing) to pay whatever it might take to send Bartleby back to wherever he came from. To that end, he questions the man about his birthplace. But Bartleby refuses to tender *any* information about himself. Why should he account to anybody?

The next day, before the narrator has a chance to fire him, Bartleby informs his employer that he will do no more writing. The suggestion is that the immediate cause is eye strain, a likely possibility, considering his “unexampled diligence” and the dim light he has worked by; his eyes look “dull and glazed” (p. 26). Once more, the narrator feels a surge of pity; in fact, for the remainder of the story he vacillates between sympathy for Bartleby and a total rejection of him. For, whether or not his eyes improve, Bartleby refuses to resume copying and finally informs his employer that he has given it up permanently. Still he remains in the office, even more of a “fixture” than before (p. 27)—though he *does* nothing. In vain the narrator orders him, tries to bribe him even, to leave, but Bartleby “prefers” not to. Out of patience, the narrator finally demands, “What *earthly* right have you to stay here?” (p. 31, italics mine). Bartleby does not answer; he does not have to. But it is a key question and one clearly intended to draw our attention to the two levels involved. The lawyer is demanding obedience to “earthly,” conventional rules of the game; but Bartleby’s is a rebellion of the spirit. They are on two different wavelengths.

The narrator is frustrated because he can see no "reason" (according to his code) for Bartleby's attitude and behavior, but when we view Bartleby as a prototype of the modern rebel with an "absurd sensitivity," his actions become understandable. When he permanently stops copying, he is refusing to be a wage slave any longer; he is rejecting the whole soul-searing struggle to earn a living—in the lawyer's office, or anywhere else—a struggle Melville understood all too well. And when he refuses to leave the office, he is passively asserting his *right* to exist—without paying the price society demands for the privilege.

It would be hard to find a more devastating attack on the establishment than Melville has made through his characterization of the lawyer and his description of the law office and the work done there. It is an undisguised protest against the daily drudgery to which many must submit to stay alive. When he cannot dislodge Bartleby, the narrator decides at first to tolerate him, piously reminding himself of the "divine injunction" to "love one another" (p. 32). The reference to Christ's commandment is highly ironic, of course. One of the things Melville valued most about Christianity was the concept of brotherly love (exemplified in *Moby Dick* by the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg), but for all his sententious professions of "fraternal" feelings, the narrator is incapable of real brotherly love—his *primary* flaw, as Melville portrays him, and the reason for Bartleby's final rejection of him. For the "blessed frame of mind" which the narrator has talked himself into quickly vanishes in the face of public opinion, "the unsolicited and uncharitable remarks" of his professional friends (p. 33).<sup>11</sup> Now determined to get rid of his problem, and realizing that Bartleby will never leave *him* voluntarily, the narrator decides that *he* will quit Bartleby—by moving his office elsewhere. After stripping the office bare, removing last the screen Bartleby stands behind, staring at the dead wall, the narrator attempts to ease his conscience by thrusting some money upon the scrivener; but the latter lets it drop to the floor. Money is not what he needs.

Before long, the lawyer who has inherited Bartleby comes to complain about the situation, insisting that, as his former employer, the narrator is responsible for the man. But the narrator refuses to accept responsibility for his fellow being, leaving it to the other lawyer to settle things in his own way—which he does, by turning Bartleby out of the office. When the latter continues to haunt the building, upsetting the other tenants, the landlord himself comes to demand that the narrator *do* something. Once again the latter denies any responsibility, protesting that Bartleby is "nothing" to him. It is only when threatened with exposure in the newspapers that the narrator agrees to have another talk with the scrivener, finally offering, in desperation, to take him into his own home "till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you" (p. 39). Not surprisingly, Bartleby refuses; and, having satisfied himself that he has done all conscience could demand, the narrator hides out for a few days, leaving matters to take their course. Bartleby is sent to Tombs prison as a vagrant.

When the narrator is once more driven by his subconscious guilt to seek the victim of his crime, he finds Bartleby facing another dead wall. And this time, it is Bartleby who rejects *him*. "I know you," he says, meaning *I know you for what you are*, "and I want nothing to say to you" (p. 40). There can be little doubt that Melville holds the narrator accountable for his lack of brotherly love.<sup>12</sup> For,

<sup>11</sup>This is not the first time the narrator has shown his susceptibility to public opinion. When he brings Turkey one of his own coats it is not so much for the clerk's benefit as to keep the man from being a "reproach" to him. See p. 8.

<sup>12</sup>For an interesting treatment of the same subject, see Camus's "The Guest," where Daru, despite his good intentions and his humanistic principles, faces what is certain to be death at the hands of vengeful Arabs because he has refused to accept responsibility for a fellow being and has insisted on treating his unwanted charge as a *guest* instead of a brother—with disastrous results for them both.

despite his talk of “fraternal” feelings, he has failed miserably as a *human* being. Even when he offers to take Bartleby home, he is offering at best a *temporary* asylum, not brotherhood. Bartleby might be an unwanted charge, but, as the other lawyer and the landlord both recognize, he has become the narrator’s responsibility. In one last attempt to buy relief for his conscience, the narrator gives the turnkey money to provide special food for Bartleby. But Bartleby is no longer eating.

Bartleby’s motives we must deduce for ourselves, since he does not explain them. Whereas the narrator cannot find any satisfactory explanations for Bartleby’s behavior, we can find many. Given the deadly monotony of the scrivener’s job and the working conditions the narrator subjects him to, it is little wonder Bartleby rebels. So does Nippers, under infinitely better circumstances. And if Bartleby were like Nippers, he might have found a way to let off steam and live with the situation. But Bartleby (as Melville has pointedly shown) is *not* like Nippers; he is a passive, mild-mannered man not given to verbal or physical explosions. So his rebellion takes the form of passive resistance. At first it is merely a matter of drawing the line, deciding what he will and will not do, but once Bartleby stops copying, “the chain of daily gestures” is broken. From that point, Bartleby moves slowly but steadily toward what Camus calls “the definitive awakening,” and an awareness of the “absurd.”

Obviously, what Bartleby finds “absurd” is the price he must pay to survive in his world, daily tedium under conditions that make life intolerable. It is also obvious that Melville intends the reader to believe the “rumor” that Bartleby formerly worked for the Dead Letter Office in Washington, until removed (at whim) by those then in charge—an incoming administration (p. 43). And when he takes a job as scrivener, Bartleby once again faces depressing conditions, and the whims of his employer—another dead wall, another dead end. It is not without reason that Melville has him constantly facing a dead wall: at the Dead Letter Office (where does one go from there?); in his cubicle at the narrator’s office; and, finally, at the prison where he spends his last days. The “definitive awakening” comes when the narrator casts him off (an act repeated by the second lawyer and the landlord, thus implicating society as a whole). It is this repudiation by his fellowman that triggers Bartleby’s final rebellion—the refusal to *be*. “Dying voluntarily,” says Camus, “implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit [of daily ‘gestures’], the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.”<sup>13</sup> What could better describe Bartleby’s situation and Bartleby’s apparent state of mind?

During his first visit to Bartleby in the prison yard, the narrator tries to convince the man the place is not so bad, after all. “Look, there is the sky,” he tells him, “and here is the grass” (p. 41). There is *life*, he implies. But Bartleby answers, “I know where I am,” suggesting that he is quite aware not only of his present location, but also of his “absurd” position in life. The final consequence is only a matter of time. Once an individual has awakened to the absurdities of his existence, he must then decide whether to accept these absurdities as an inevitable part of the human condition. In Bartleby’s case, the answer is clearly *no*.

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<sup>13</sup>Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 5.