

Doing Justice to Bartleby

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Herman Melville's 1853 short story "Bartleby" is a text about haunting and a text that haunts. It is a tale that intimates that there are some secrets that never can be revealed and therefore raises the important question of how one can act and react in the face of incomplete knowledge and the possibility of total loss. It structures a desire for meaning that never can be fulfilled—as such, it foregrounds lack, which is the nature of haunting and, in haunting, intimates that to be human is precisely to be haunted.

"Bartleby" is a short story that explicitly traffics in ghostly dead letters. Within the tale, the only piece of background information uncovered about the narrator's uncanny scrivener is the posthumously reported "rumor" that he served for a time as a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office in Washington. The lawyer appends this "vague report" as an epilogue that he cannot substantiate. However, the supplemental status of the epilogue and its equation of dead letters with dead men compels a reevaluation of the narrative as a whole and encourages the reader to consider Bartleby himself as a type of "dead letter," and his story as itself a rumor, an unsubstantiated report. The question that the ghostly scrivener raises for the narrator whom he haunts is how can one act in the absence of understanding? The more general question that the narrator's dilemma raises is the question of how one is to "do justice" to another when the other will always escape reduction to a singular narrative, will always escape knowing in full. What finally does it mean to do justice to Bartleby, to this uncanny dead letter that resists all attempts at understanding?

"Bartleby" ultimately raises the possibilities that some things may not be knowable or may be lost forever—that history may not be recoverable, that secrets may remain unrevealed. Beyond this, the tale intimates that the possibilities of misinterpretation, of "dissemination," are intrinsic to language in general. The conclusion (or lack thereof) of "Bartleby" points to the unsettling realization that every letter is potentially a "dead letter"—that, as famously proposed by Jacques Derrida, a letter can

always *not* arrive at its destination. Meaning can always go astray. If this is an inherent possibility of language, then “Bartleby” finally raises the question of what it means for meaning to arrive—of what it in fact means for something to mean at all.

Correspondences

The dead letter office account at the end of the narrative refers the reader back to the narrative’s beginning, in which the lawyer introduces his subject as one that he precisely *cannot* narrate. The first paragraph of “Bartleby” opens,

I am a rather elderly man. The nature of my avocations, for the last thirty years, has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom, as yet, nothing, that I know of, has ever been written—I mean, the law-copyists, or scriveners. I have known very many of them, professionally and privately, and, if I pleased, could relate divers histories, at which good-natured souls 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, the strangest I ever saw, or heard of. (13)

Here, the narrator, the unnamed lawyer, begins his first-person narration by positioning himself—an elderly man having encountered many scriveners—and then telling the reader what he will *not* recount: what he will not provide is a romantic or sentimental account of any of a “singular set” of men about whom nothing has been written but who could serve as the subjects of satisfying biographical narratives. Rather, from this singular set of men, the narrator will single out one singular being for discussion.

The narrator continues:

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. (13)

The narrator reveals that he will not provide what he potentially could narrate—the satisfactory biography of any representative member of the singular set of scriveners. And since nothing yet has been written (as far as the narrator knows) of this group, the law-copyists, the narrator thus forfeits his opportunity to produce a “full and satisfactory” biographical account. Instead, the lawyer will attempt to tell what he knows cannot be told—the biography of someone for whom the necessary materials for the telling of that biography do not exist. Or rather, he will not in fact

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provide a biography, but report in a "few passages" what is rumored about and what he observed of his subject.

In this first paragraph of the text, the important themes of loss of origin and confusion of original and copy that organize the text as a whole are already apparent. What cannot be done is to tell the story of *Bartleby*. The lawyer, the originator of legal documents that he employs scribes to copy, indicates that he here will recount the story of just such a copyist by writing what he saw and heard. In this retrospective reporting of events witnessed, the narrator will not originate but reproduce what has already transpired. He will copy what he has seen and heard of his copyist—his copyist who does not copy and who is an original among the singular set of copyists. This confusion of original and copy, that persists throughout the narrative, ultimately calls into question the sanctity of all originals.

Even before *Bartleby* is hired to serve as a law-copyist, confusion of original and copy and the power of law to sanction or authorize particular narratives are already concerns of the text. The reader is informed prior to *Bartleby's* arrival that Nippers, another one of the narrator's scribes, evidences ambition in excess of his current post that takes the form of "an unwarrantable usurpation of strictly professional affairs, such as the original drawing up of legal documents" (16). Nippers, who is not a lawyer, is therefore not empowered by the law to produce original legal documents. Both he and his documents in this respect are "false copies." They aspire to a level of authenticity that they cannot attain. The lawyer, however, does not seem particularly concerned with his scribe's actions (perhaps because they do not directly impact upon him) and appears to accept them as he does the idiosyncrasies of his other employees, Turkey and Ginger Nut. It is *Bartleby* who manages to provoke a response from the narrator—not through the production of unauthorized original documents, but rather through his refusal to verify his copies as exact copies of an authorized original. Whereas Nippers tries to pass off fake documents as real—or rather unauthorized as authorized—*Bartleby's* refusal to verify leaves the documents he produces (like a rumor) in a spectral limbo-space between real and fake, authorized and unauthorized. This prospect of unverified copy raises the unsettling question of how in fact one distinguishes between original and copy in the first place.

As Maurice Blanchot points out, the theory of mimesis rests on a fundamental paradox—the only perfect imitation of an object would in fact be that object itself. Leslie Hill summarizes, "Before any object may be perceived as an exact, mimetic copy of another, a margin of alterity must first have differentiated object from copy in order that the relation

of resemblance between the two may be instituted at all" (64). It may be said that it is this "ineliminable residue" that remains, that exceeds the mimetic process, that accounts for the uncanniness of the double, of two things that are the same, yet are not the same (65). In the space of the law office, this uncanniness of the double, the threat of confusion between original and copy, is contained by a strict process of *accounting*. The lawyer produces the original document and signs it. The copies can be distinguished by the handwriting of the scrivener and by the fact that they remain unsigned until verified. Once the copy is signed, however, it will act as an original. The authorizing signature enacts a metamorphosis—it "activates" the scrivener's inactive copy and transforms it into an original. The copy as copy therefore only exists as an interstitial stage in the creation of duplicate originals.

Bartleby's refusal to verify his copy raises the possibility that an "inaccurate" copy might be activated as an original—that *the original might then differ from itself*. According to J. Hillis Miller, Bartleby's refusal to verify his copy "makes what he has copied into something more ominous and uncanny. He makes them into words that have meaning but have been drained of their efficacy and made into ghosts of themselves. They have been etiolated, whitened, neutralized—neither words nor nonwords" (159). Miller characterizes unverified copy as a type of dead letter, "of no more use than a blank sheet of paper" (157). However, Bartleby's unauthorized words are anything but null and void. On the contrary, they are remarkably potent and present a marked threat to the sanctity of the original. They possess the power to act as unauthorized forces, outside of the system of law. It is precisely the process of verification that neutralizes the disruptive possibilities of the copy by authorizing it to act as a "lawful" original. Until this process of verification takes place, it is not in fact clear that Bartleby has not produced another original, a different original, a document that differs in content from the model it is supposed to duplicate. It is in fact the process of verification that makes of Bartleby a copyist. Until that point, Bartleby's documents are not "dead letters," but rather the more uncanny and threatening "living dead letters," letters that raise concerns about the ability of law to delimit alternative interpretations. What the system of law must repress is the possibility that the "original original" may already differ from itself—that in spite of the legal system's hyperawareness of the possibility of misinterpretation, this possibility can never be foreclosed entirely.¹

Machine in the Ghost

"Bartleby," as I have already begun to detail above, is insistently about the tenuous distinctions between original and copy, real and fake, and

authentic and forgery. Bartleby after all is a copyist who first refuses to verify his copy so that it can be approved as an "authentic copy" and then refuses to copy at all. In the process, according to John Carlos Rowe, Bartleby both "raises the possibility that the 'original' text may be led astray, [and] that the 'copy' may take the place of its model" (126); that is, Bartleby calls into question the very mechanisms that distinguish between original and copy. In addition, "Bartleby" also confounds the opposition between life and death. Bartleby himself is an uncanny spectral presence, is in fact a "forgery," a simulacrum of the human. It is Bartleby's "betweenness," his liminality that provides the narrative with its heightened charge or aura of the uncanny. Bartleby's "textualization," that is, the identification of him with an unreadable letter, points to the ways in which all human subjects are "texts," are socially constructed and endowed with meaning by virtue of their places within language and culture. His ghostliness indicates the ways in which this imposition of symbolic meaning from without results in the "fading" of the subject beneath the weight of the signifying chain of language. The narrator's final expostulation generalizing Bartleby's condition as the inevitable fate of all humanity suggests that all subjects of language are, in a sense, dead letters, texts that never can be completely read, texts that always resist and exceed the imposition of determinate meaning.

That there is something strange about Bartleby is evident from his first appearance in the narrative. The lawyer observes, "In answer to my advertisement, a motionless young man one morning stood upon my office threshold . . . I can see that figure now—pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby" (19). That Bartleby should first appear as an "it" on the threshold is appropriate for Bartleby is himself a "threshold figure," a liminal entity somehow other than human. That Bartleby should just appear one morning, as if conjured magically out of thin air, coincides with Bartleby's lack of history, the fact that nothing (with the notable exception of the dead letter office rumor) is recoverable about Bartleby's past.

Bartleby does not in fact *arrive* at the lawyer's office; he is not coming from anywhere. Rather, he is first not there and then suddenly there. The description of him as standing "motionless" adds to the impression that he has simply materialized out of nowhere, while simultaneously suggesting the opposite—that he has instead always been standing there, overlooked—an impression reinforced by the lawyer's later emphatic observation that one "prime thing" about Bartleby was that "*he was always there*" (26), always present in the office, at least after his initial discovery. That Bartleby should be "motionless" further indicates Bartleby's remove from the sphere of common humanity—in contrast to

the activity and emotions of the lawyer and his employees, *Bartleby* is still, lacking in vitality and emotion, thing-like. He is not a "who," but rather a "what" left like a basket on the lawyer's doorstep. His motionlessness and thing-like nature is reinforced by the passivity of the construction "it was *Bartleby*."

Robert E. Abrams, in his article "'*Bartleby*' and the Fragile Pageantry of the Ego," characterizes *Bartleby*'s unworldliness by describing him as a "close cousin of the silent movie automaton" (494). *Bartleby* indeed initially is depicted as a sort of automaton, working ceaselessly and without emotion. The lawyer observes that

[a]t first, *Bartleby* 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 sunlight 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. (19-20)

As in the lawyer's prior description, *Bartleby* here remains otherwise than human—a thing, a machine, now in motion, but mechanical and repetitive.² It is as if *Bartleby* has all at once been activated, "switched on." The lawyer's use of the adverbs "silently" and "palely" resonate with his earlier description of the "pallidly neat" *Bartleby*'s silent, motionless appearance upon the threshold of the office. *Bartleby* will be figured repeatedly throughout the narrative as "pale," "pallid," "cadaverous," and, as he is increasingly distanced from the living, as an "apparition" and as a "ghost."

In *Through the Custom-House: Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Modern Theory*, Rowe notes that *Bartleby* figures what Freud describes as the "uncanny" in psychic experience (129), "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (Freud, "Uncanny" 20). Indeed, one of the remarkable things about "*Bartleby*" is the extent to which the tale condenses multiple manifestations of the uncanny as detailed by Freud including confusion between man and machine, the presence of spirits and ghosts, and manifestations of involuntary repetition. What "*Bartleby*" in fact makes apparent is the uncanny automatonism of ghosts.

Freud observes in "The Uncanny" that the sensation of the uncanny is excited in the highest degree "in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts" (47). He conjectures that this is so because the mind retains the primitive belief that "the deceased becomes the enemy of his survivor and wants to carry him off to share his new life with him" (48). In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud expands upon this point, speculating that the hostility the dead are presumed to bear

toward the living is actually the result of a psychic displacement of the guilt borne by the living for the repressed wish for the death and unconscious satisfaction at the death of the now-deceased.

However, beyond displaced guilt, the fear of the dead is also related to fear of death more generally. In her close reading of Freud's essay on the uncanny, Hélène Cixous proposes that "The direct figure of the uncanny is the Ghost. The Ghost is the fiction of our relationship with death, concretized by the specter in literature. The relationship to death reveals *the highest degree* of the *Unheimliche*. There is nothing more notorious and uncanny to our thought than mortality" (542). The ghost is the uncanniest of figures because *it makes death present* and death, according to Cixous, is something that cannot be known, the ultimate secret. Death is "That which signifies without that which is signified. What is an absolute secret, absolutely new and which should remain hidden, because it has shown itself to me, is the fact that I am dead; only the dead know the secret of death" (543). The ghost, as a "memento mori," as a reminder of death as both the most proper of human possibilities and simultaneously an impossibility, an experience never accessible as such for any human subject who is effaced in dying, haunts the living as a prophecy of the inevitable rendezvous with the unknown. The ghost thus reminds one of what one knows intimately but constantly tries to forget—the inevitability of death.

Yet the ghost, in its return from death, from the beyond, transgresses the limit of death. According to Cixous, it is in fact this "betweenness" that is most tainted with strangeness. "What is intolerable is that the Ghost erases the limit which exists between two states, neither alive nor dead; passing through, the dead man returns in the manner of the Repressed" (543). As such an interstitial "threshold" entity, the ghost is "impure" in the sense of impurity developed by Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger*—it is an uncanny figure that violates classificatory boundaries and disrupts orderly categorization of forms. The ghost is the confusion of life and death—a marginal figure, invested with the taboo of the in-between. The taboo nature of the interstitial leads one back to Bartleby, the ghostly "threshold" figure poised between life and death and man and machine.

As numerous critics have observed, Bartleby is precisely such a ghostly entity, in Abrams's words, "in the world, but not of the world" (490).³ As noted, Bartleby is persistently figured by the text as spectral—as an "apparition," as "cadaverous," and as a "ghost." His extreme uncanniness derives from this ghostly betweenness, the fact that he occupies an impossible position between life and death. In a sense, his dying at the end of the text is only the "official" recognition of what has

been the case throughout the whole of the text itself—that Bartleby is already dead. Miller, in an important chapter on Bartleby in *Versions of Pygmalion*, writes:

What Bartleby brings . . . is the otherness that all along haunts or inhabits life from the inside. This otherness can by no method, such as the long series of techniques the narrator tries, be accounted for, narrated, rationalized, or in any other way reassimilated into ordinary life, though it is a permanent part of that ordinary life. Bartleby is the alien that may neither be thrust out the door nor domesticated, brought into the family, given citizenship papers. Bartleby is the invasion of death into life, but not death as something from outside life. He is death as the other side of life or the cohabitant with life. (172)

What “Bartleby” dramatizes, in Miller’s opinion, as well as that of Rowe, is “the way man keeps secret what is most familiar to him” (Rowe 132), that is, death at the heart of life.

Bartleby’s “otherness” is the strangeness of loss. His spectral presence dramatizes the unknowability of death. Bartleby and his story are intimately connected: Bartleby will not recover and there can be no recovery of his story. Both are lost—and dramatize the loss at the heart of language and life. What the narrator of Bartleby’s story, the lawyer, is attempting to do is to account for him, to make sense of him. But, as Poe’s epigraph to “The Man of the Crowd” points out, “there are certain books which will not permit themselves to be read,” certain stories which can never be told. Bartleby’s history is just such an unreadable text and, as Miller observes, “The narrator’s writing is also an attempt at a reading, a failed attempt to read Bartleby” (173). What Bartleby as unrecoverable text makes apparent is the way in which death operates in language itself, language that is defined by absence.

Indeed, the character of Bartleby in a certain sense is doubly uncanny, condensing as he does confusion both of living and dead and man and machine. Or rather what is most uncanny about Bartleby is that, in contrast to the long-standing distinction between the body as a machine and the spirit as the divine element in man, Bartleby is not a spiritual machine, but a *machine-like spirit*. Bartleby as uncanny automaton reverses the familiar notion of the “ghost in the machine” to reveal the machinic in the ghost—the ghost not as a figure for independent autonomy, but of programmed repetition. “Bartleby” reveals ghosts to be repeating machines that persist in their impossible demands.

Hauntings in literature generally persist until a certain end is realized—revenge, redress of a crime, recovery of some lost story or object, etc. Slavoj Žižek considers this aspect of the return of the dead in *Looking Awry* when he writes, “Why do the dead return? The answer offered by Lacan is the same as that found in popular culture: *because they were not*

properly buried, i.e. because something went wrong with their obsequies. The return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolization; the dead return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt" (23). The dead return, according to Žižek, as traces or reminders of a violation of symbolic codes. The ghost of Hamlet's father returns, for example, to "settle symbolic accounts" (23). In the case of Hamlet's father, there has been a violation of law—a crime has been committed, and the danger exists that this crime will go unknown and unredressed. Hamlet's father returns from the dead to demand revenge. The ghost of Hamlet's father is a repeating machine functioning as an agent of symbolic law. The uncanniness of the ghost is thus related not only to its interstitiality—the way in which it disturbs categorical classification, the way in which it makes the unknowability of death present, but also to its mechanical nature, the way in which it repeats.

Bartleby is, of course, defined by repetition (his persistent reiteration of the phrase "I prefer not to"), and *Bartleby* precisely has the effect of making others feel as if they are dreaming, as if they are caught up in a dream from which they cannot escape. Indeed, the narrator, approximating Freud's description of the fatefulness or inescapability of uncanny repetition experienced as if in a dream, begins to feel that his troubles with the scrivener "had been all predestinated from eternity, and *Bartleby* was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence" (37). Ann Smock captures this dream-like or mesmerizing aspect of *Bartleby* when she writes of the narrator, "It would seem that, as sometimes happens in dreams, he is running as hard as he can and remaining in place, unable to move either forward or back" (85). Milton R. Stern observes that, like a character in a dream—and in contrast to the narrator—there is something "unreal" about *Bartleby*. Stern writes that

the lawyer and *Bartleby* are characters from two distinctly different modes of fiction. The narrator comes from a recognizable world and can be measured in terms of that world: he is the kind of character who inhabits the province of realist fiction. *Bartleby*, however, in every way inhabits a world other than the narrator's. He comes from the province of allegorical fiction, or romantic fiction, or both. The narrator is a human character; *Bartleby* is a metaphor. (29)

Stern concludes that "The science-fiction and gothic impingement of alien worlds gives '*Bartleby*' its weirdness. One does not expect the preternatural or the preternaturalistic to be accommodated into simultaneous existence with the realistic or the naturalistic" (29).

There is no denying that *Bartleby* is alien (alien is also Miller's word for him), that he does not belong to the world of the lawyer. However, I would suggest one significant emendation to Stern's assessment here: the problem with *Bartleby* is not that he is a metaphor, but that he *refuses*

to be a metaphor. Stern concludes that Bartleby is a "metaphor" based on his sense that Bartleby is "fixed." He writes, "[t]he vehicle for the allegorical character is typalism. Bartleby is given metaphoric weightings by which he is recognized, mysterious qualities independent of verisimilitude or realistic statistication. . . . [T]he inhabitant of the typal world is fixed. In speech, action, and possibility Bartleby *as character* is as rigidly fixed as a corpse" (29). Yet a metaphor is that which carries or transports. The difficulty with Bartleby is that he *fails* to be a metaphor; despite the ghostly rhetoric the narrator employs to describe him, Bartleby is rather too solid, too concrete.

The whole problem with Bartleby is that he is *too there*, he will not move, he will not budge. There is an opacity to Bartleby, a persistent materiality—neither the narrator nor the reader can "see through" him, understand his motivations. Indeed, in a certain sense, "Bartleby" is all about the faculty of vision—and seeing beyond or beneath the surface of things. When questioned as to his intractability, Bartleby's response is simply "do you not see the reason for yourself?" But the narrator and the reader cannot—or will not—see the reason. Nothing about Bartleby is transparent. The question that Bartleby puts to the narrator and that the text puts to the reader is how does one grapple with the opaque, inscrutable thing? Rather than a metaphor, conveying or communicating meaning, Bartleby, in this story of "Wall Street," is himself a type of wall blocking the conveyance of meaning. There is a certain paradox here—to say that Bartleby is a "wall" blocking meaning is still to characterize him metaphorically—but it is not to say what he *means* but what he *does*, how he functions. Bartleby acts as an "anamorphic blot" in the narrator's frame of reference. He is an inscrutable and disturbing object that should not be there and that cannot be viewed aright by the narrator except by looking awry—which would involve the distortion of the rest of the narrator's world. He is simultaneously spectral, diffuse, haunting, and somehow also ultra-dense—a "black hole" of meaning. This is his ghostliness, his uncanniness—he is both a fragile physical thing, potentially knowable, and the terror of the unknown, of death made manifest. Why are ghosts so scary? Because to see a ghost is not just to see a translucent material entity, barely there, always on the verge of going out of existence, but to confront the positive consistency of lack and the terror of the real, of death, absence, the unknowable made manifest. Bartleby in this sense is all too evident.

Bartleby's opacity, his resistance to serving as a metaphor, however, generates fear and prompts attempts to contain him, to fix him—to impose meaning upon him, which is to avoid reading him as the blockage of meaning. Bartleby as "stain" or "blot" *produces* meaning. Gordon E.

Bigelow characterizes him—and the story more generally—as a “generator” of meaning (350). Donald H. Craver and Patricia R. Plante concur when they characterize “Bartleby” as suggesting a whole group of meanings with no single meaning exhausting the text’s “connotativeness” (129). One might in fact wish to consider “Bartleby” as a “technology” of interpretation, as a text that produces continuous interpretations. However, this “compulsion to find meaning” (Bigelow 348) in “Bartleby” derives precisely from the fact that the meaning is not obvious, that a residue of ambiguity resists all reading, all interpretation. Bartleby fails to communicate determinate meaning—he resists being turned into a metaphor.

In a similar manner, Bartleby’s repeated responses “I prefer not to” and “I am not particular” disrupt the rules of language that attempt to fix meaning, to pin signifier to signified, to differentiate clearly between sign and referent, original and copy. The problem with Bartleby’s responses is that he does not seem to say what he means. When he says that he “prefers not to,” what he really *seems* to mean is that he *will* not. And when he says that he is not particular, it is clear that he is very particular indeed. The reader and the lawyer are in the same untenable position when it comes to interpreting Bartleby’s statements: what should one make of this discrepancy between statement and action? How can one “read” Bartleby, interpret his statements, when he does not *seem* to mean what he says? For the lawyer, this discrepancy is especially problematic because he makes his living by seeking to limit the disseminative power of language—the realm of law is one in which language is very carefully controlled to limit interpretive possibilities. Bartleby introduces an intolerable ambiguity into the realm of the law—he raises the disturbing possibility that a gap can always exist between what one says and what one means.

Law is also a realm in which words *act*, cause things to happen. In contrast, Bartleby’s “I prefer not to”

cannot be assimilated to any dialectical or oppositional way of thinking. You can neither deny it nor accept it. It is neither constative nor performative, or perhaps it might be better to say that it is an exceedingly disquieting form of performative. It is a use of words to make something happen, but what it makes happen is to bring about the impossibility of making anything happen with words. It performs the blockage of performative language by which the narrator lives and makes his living. (Miller 156)

As a result of this blockage, the narrator is left *stunned* each time, “thunderstruck,” unable to connect what Bartleby says with what he seems to mean. Language and meaning seem to have been disconnected.

At one point, the narrator attempts to force the issue, to force Bartleby to say exactly what he means:

"Bartleby," said I, "Ginger Nut is away; just step around to the Post Office, won't you?" (it was but a three minutes' walk) "and see if there is anything for me."

"I would prefer not to."

"You will not?"

"I prefer not." (25)

Here, the lawyer's attempt to elicit a firm yes or no response from Bartleby is thwarted by the scrivener's perverse refusal to accede to ready intelligibility. However, far from doing nothing with words, or making words do nothing, as Miller suggests, Bartleby's frustrating responses are, as Marvin Hunt points out, remarkably *potent* (280). In place of communicating meaning, they communicate a shock. And in place of conscious knowing, Bartleby's responses somehow find their way into the unconscious of others. Bartleby's responses act to render the narrator like Bartleby and to infect the speech of others.

That the narrator and the other workers unconsciously begin to copy Bartleby becomes evident in the way in which his language "infects" their own. Ironically, although Bartleby's responses demonstrate breakdowns of communication, his language itself is *communicable*, and although he refuses to copy, others copy him. The narrator observes that, "Somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word 'prefer' upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions" (31), and it becomes evident that Bartleby has also "turned the tongues" of Nippers and Turkey as well (31). Here again, Bartleby is correlated with dreams, mesmerism, and the realm of the unconscious. He manages to "get under the skin" of those around him in such a way that they begin to copy him without being aware of it.⁴

Beyond adopting Bartleby's language, the lawyer's response to Bartleby is to approximate the latter's own ghostliness and silence. He is "turned into a pillar of salt" (21) by Bartleby's refusal to examine his copy and considers himself rendered "impotent" and "unmanned" (27) by Bartleby's upending of the traditional office hierarchy.⁵ However, it is the narrator's encounter with Bartleby on the Sunday morning when the narrator has expected Bartleby to have departed the premises that makes the transformation most apparent. The narrator writes, "I was thunderstruck. For an instant I stood like the man who, pipe in mouth, was killed one cloudless afternoon long ago in Virginia, by summer lightning; at his own warm open window he was killed, and remained leaning out there upon the dreamy afternoon, till some one touched him, when he fell" (34-35). This image of the thunderstruck man presents

another example of confusion between life and death and original and copy. In the same way that Bartleby manipulates language, both by refusing to verify his copy and by refusing to say what he means such that the utterances inhabit a liminal space between active and passive, authorized and unauthorized, life and death, and in the same way that Bartleby himself is figured as an uncanny spectral presence inhabiting the space between life and death, the effect that he has upon others is to infect them with a similar confusion between life and death. *The effect that he has is to turn others into copies of himself.* The reversal here is complete—the lawyer, the boss, bows to the “wondrous ascendancy” which the “inscrutable scrivener” has over him and momentarily becomes a copy of his copyist (35).

The narrator’s parable of the thunderstruck man parallels the action of “Bartleby” in even more significant ways: the account foregrounds both uncanny resemblance and the power of touch. The thunderstruck man literally is hit by something “out of the blue,” a shock that kills him while he stands at the window of his own home. Then, he continues to masquerade as the living, to appear alive, until he is touched and he falls. That the narrator should figure himself as just such a thunderstruck man foreshadows his ultimate conclusion—his resignation to the fact that Bartleby’s hopelessness is the general condition of humanity, that all of us are in a sense thunderstruck, awaiting the touch that will awaken us to our true status as beings-toward-death. And what prompts this realization—the narrator’s “fall”—is precisely that, in the absence of comprehension, he is “touched” by Bartleby, moved by another “child of Adam.”

Love Letters

The paradox of Bartleby, which is also the paradox of language, is that he both kills and enlivens. His active passivity both disarms others and goads them into action. His “cadaverous” language leaves the narrator both “thunderstruck” and “burning.” For Rowe, Bartleby is in fact the essence of the uncanny; he is “a dramatization of the way man keeps secret what is most familiar to him” (132). This secret that the spectral Bartleby dramatizes is “the repression of death that operates in language as both its desire and its dread, its resource and its fear” (132).

This is a good description for it gets at both poles—the desire and the dread—of the narrator’s relation to Bartleby. As is evident throughout the text, while the narrator is persistently frustrated and irritated by Bartleby’s intractability, the scrivener exercises some attraction, some hold over the narrator. Patricia Barber makes the assertion in her article “What if Bartleby Were a Woman?” that “Bartleby” is a story of “failed

love" (214), that it is "essentially a love story, a story about a man who is confined in an office setting that forbids intimacy and who comes to love a person he cannot save" (223). But what is this "love" that the narrator feels for Bartleby? Is it merely the anxious fascination that the uncanny exerts by reminding us of something long forgotten? Is the narrator's simultaneous attraction to and repulsion by Bartleby simply the narcissistic tug of a part of himself that he has repressed? If he "loves" this person whom he cannot save, does he love him precisely because he cannot save him? What would it mean finally to "save" Bartleby? Can one love someone whom one is called upon to save? And is Bartleby the (only) one who needs saving?

The rhetoric of "saving" operates here in two registers: the spiritual or religious and the economic. Barber proposes that "the story evokes our sense of pity and helplessness in the confrontation with this isolate [Bartleby]" (219). For the narrator to "save" Bartleby in Barber's sense would presumably mean for him to penetrate Bartleby's impassive façade, to elicit some emotion from him, and, on a basic level, to learn Bartleby's story. After all, the narrator virtually pleads with Bartleby for the latter to impart even the smallest detail of his background or history. The sense that one receives is that if Bartleby would volunteer even the tiniest bit of information, if he would, in the narrator's words, be even "a little reasonable" (30), the course of his destiny would be diverted—he would be "saved" from dying forlorn and alone.

However, saving Bartleby in this spiritual sense for the narrator means saving him in an economic sense as well. To prevent Bartleby from being the "wasted" man the narrator sees lying dead on the grass at the end of the story, to prevent his story from being an "irreparable loss to literature," the narrator requires that Bartleby be used, put to use, useful. To save Bartleby would be to *account* for Bartleby, to call him to account, to hold him accountable—and, as such, re-countable. But Bartleby will not account for himself, he will not be held accountable for his copying, he will not recount his history, and he will not settle accounts with the narrator (the money the narrator tries to give him remains untouched).

The tenderness that the narrator bears toward Bartleby is related precisely to Bartleby's unaccountability. If Bartleby would only be a "little rational," if he would engage in a relationship of exchange with the narrator, the narrator could replace tenderness with legal tender. He repeatedly reports that if only Bartleby would demonstrate some engagement with him and the world, then ironically, the narrator could end his engagement with Bartleby. After Bartleby's first refusal to verify his copy, the lawyer notes that, "Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been

anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises" (21). Because Bartleby is unresponsive, the narrator cannot respond. Or rather, the narrator's non-response is a result of his emotional response to Bartleby and his non-responsiveness.

Ironically, Bartleby's "non-response," his refusal to respond is a powerful response indeed—one that both "touches" and "disconcerts" the lawyer. Following Bartleby's "I would prefer not to," the narrator explains, "With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously from my presence. But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but, in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me. I began to reason with him" (21). Here it is evident, as in the last quotation, that if Bartleby would be reasonable, if he would accede to "common usage and common sense" (22), then the narrator could in fact relinquish reason himself, "scorn words" and give in to his "dreadful passion" to "violently dismiss" Bartleby. But because Bartleby is unaccountable, he cannot be summarily dismissed. The narrator cannot settle accounts with Bartleby—Bartleby will not allow the narrator to acquit himself of the debt to or responsibility he feels for Bartleby. Because Bartleby is unreasonable, the narrator struggles to retain his own reason—he is particularly reminded of this when he considers the "tragedy of the unfortunate Adams and the still more unfortunate Colt" (36), that is, when thoughts of violence momentarily enter his head. In fact, throughout the tale the narrator attempts to reason with himself, to rationalize his inability to confront and dismiss Bartleby. But he cannot rationalize his response to Bartleby because Bartleby's irrationality has "touched" him—he has been "moved" by the scrivener's stillness. If Bartleby is "a little *luny*" (22), a bit "touched," his lunacy, (like his language), is communicable; he touches others, and renders them unreasonable. The narrator, "an eminently *safe* man" (13) who considers his primary virtues "prudence" and "method" (14), and who prior to his encounter with Bartleby has never experienced "aught but a not unpleasant sadness," now finds himself seized by an "overpowering stinging melancholy" (28). The narrator's safe—or rather in this story of "Wall Street," his wall—has been cracked. Instead of a sadness he can enjoy, instead of doing charity for the sake of his own soul, he now finds himself no longer in control of his reason. Instead of communicating meaning, Bartleby has evoked pathos. Indeed, Bartleby has forced the narrator out of his comfortable retreat, his safe circuit of conveyance. The narrator, a bachelor, a man seemingly without close friends or family, attempts to

run from Bartleby, but he cannot quit himself of Bartleby, he cannot leave Bartleby behind. He seems to carry Bartleby wherever he goes.

According to Dan McCall, the "deepest" question surrounding the story is "what you do with Bartleby" (113). Miller arrives at a similar conclusion when he observes that the story of "Bartleby" is the story of the narrator's "responsibility," which is also the story of his "ethical relation, or failure of ethical relation, to Bartleby" (142). Miller's gloss on "Bartleby" is that the process of taking responsibility for another, of fulfilling one's obligation to the other, is dependent upon knowing the story of the other. He writes,

"Bartleby the Scrivener" is the story of the failure of the narrator to tell the complete story of Bartleby. It is also the story of the corollary of this failure: the narrator therefore cannot determine his ethical responsibility toward Bartleby and act on it. The moral or message of "Bartleby," if there is one, seems to be the following: I cannot determine what my ethical obligation to my neighbor is, and then act on that obligation, unless I can identify him by telling his story. (142)

While I agree with Miller's characterization of "Bartleby" as the "story of the failure of the narrator to tell the complete story of Bartleby," I must take issue with his conclusions. First of all, in the same way that Bartleby's silence is *telling*, that his *impassivity* moves, one can say that the story of "Bartleby" succeeds in failing to tell the story of Bartleby. After all, one does receive Bartleby's story—the narrator does succeed in telling a story about the failure to tell Bartleby's story. But beyond this, Miller's reading of the story leaves an ethical void—if Bartleby as dead letter demonstrates that every letter can go astray, that stories can be lost, that misinterpretation is always possible, and that dissemination is intrinsic to writing, then on what basis can an ethics based on an historical narrative of identity be founded? The narrator's final expostulation at the end of the text is so powerful in this respect because it equates all humanity with Bartleby and indicates that all subjects of language are, in a sense, "ghostly" like Bartleby. If all stories are as potentially lost as Bartleby's, if no stories are transcendently grounded in truth, on what basis is an ethics of responsibility possible?

To a certain extent, Miller does recognize this dilemma. Toward the end of the chapter, he recapitulates, this time as his own assertion rather than a gloss on Melville, "We cannot identify our ethical responsibility to a person we cannot identify, whose story we cannot tell. None of this is possible with Bartleby" (174-75). He then continues:

On the other hand, in his ghostly way, Bartleby demands with calm authority that the narrator take responsibility for him. . . . The narrator's inability to fulfill his responsibility to Bartleby is analogous to our inability to read this text in the sense of providing a satisfactory

interpretation based on what the text says. On the one hand the story demands to be read, with an authority like that of Bartleby himself over the narrator. . . . On the other hand it cannot be read. It demands an impossible task, and the reader remains paralyzed by the text, called upon to act but unable to act. (175)

And yet Miller has acted, just as I and literally hundreds of others have acted, on a certain level, to "take responsibility" for the text in attempting to "work" with "Bartleby." Miller equates the "taking of responsibility" with the attempt to "do justice" to the other. He writes:

If the narrator can encompass Bartleby with words, if he can do justice to him, he may simultaneously have accounted for him, naturalized him after all, and freed himself from his unfulfilled obligation. He will have made an adequate response to the demand Bartleby has made on him. The narrator, that is, may have justified himself while doing justice to Bartleby.

This is impossible because Bartleby cannot be identified. His story cannot be told. (173)

This impasse, the imperative yet impossible task of telling the untellable, the "aporia" of justice, is precisely the ethical moment. What it suggests is that justice itself is not reasonable—that it demands the impossible. Doing justice to Bartleby—to the other, to any ghostly figure that haunts—entails recognizing the impossibility of doing justice to the other and then assuming the burden of the responsibility anyway, knowing that there will always be a remainder, an undomesticatable strangeness. Ultimately, the terrible and terrifying responsibility lies in the *attempt* at the telling of the impossible story and justice is approached through the recognition of this impossibility. Indeed, a certain *injustice* lies in believing that one has told the story of the other, captured the essence of the other in a singular narrative.

At base, "Bartleby" asks how one can respond in the face of incomplete knowledge. How can one act ethically toward others—and how can one deal with ghosts—if their stories are not ultimately knowable and if history is not always recoverable? In Miller's terms, "Bartleby" asks how justice can be served if the other cannot be "identified" and narrativized. "Telling" someone's story, "summarizing" an identity through narrative, is not to "do justice" to that individual. As "Bartleby" in fact makes clear, the "original" is never self-identical and the copy never exact. The story is not the individual nor can one presume "truly" to "know" an individual by "reading" his or her story.

According to Miller, "Bartleby" demands the impossible from the reader. "Imperiously, imperatively, it says, 'Read me!' On the other hand it cannot be read. It demands an impossible task, and the reader remains paralyzed by the text, called upon to act but unable to act" (175). However, to accept "paralysis" in the face of an inescapable hermeneutic

circle is to accept injustice and to abandon oneself to nihilism. As Derrida indicates in "Force of Law," the "impossibility of justice in the present" needs to be taken as an imperative toward action rather than an impediment. The narrator attempts to do justice to Bartleby precisely by recounting the story of why his story cannot be told. Rather than attempting to neutralize Bartleby's strangeness, to contain his otherness within a narrative that presumes to know Bartleby, to explain his actions, the narrator ultimately leaves Bartleby to himself, recognizes Bartleby's strangeness, his lostness—and therefore attempts to mourn him *as lost*. What Bartleby compels the narrator to do is to tell the story of why he cannot tell the story of Bartleby. In a sense, this is all that the narrator can do with the "crumbs," the *mors*, the bits that Bartleby leaves behind. To recognize this is to recognize justice beyond the economy of law, a different model of justice in which there is always something left over, always a remainder, something that escapes accounting—something left out. The narrator attempts to do justice to Bartleby, to remember him, to acquit some debt that he feels toward him, yet words fail to account for Bartleby—they fail to encompass either his fullness or his lack—and the absence he leaves behind.

This is why I think one must consider the story of Bartleby as a type of love letter from the narrator to Bartleby. The absent Bartleby stands behind the narrator, close upon him, pointing over his shoulder as he composes the story of Bartleby. He floats there in memory as the now-elderly lawyer recounts the story of the unaccountable person who touched him, who penetrated his walls. If every letter can be a dead letter, perhaps every letter can also be a love letter, a desirous reaching out to someone not present, across space and time. Ultimately, the narrator has been *moved to write* by Bartleby. His story of Bartleby is a letter to Bartleby, an attempt to fill in a void with words, in spite of the fact that words themselves are governed by a lack all their own. The narrator's narrative ultimately is an inscription of loss and the title of the narrative, "Bartleby," is also an epitaph as the narrator is moved to mourn the lost Bartleby.

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Notes

¹The inherent possibility of misinterpretation leads to an even more unsettling conclusion: that there is no single self-present original, but always multiple differing originals. Barbara Johnson describes this in *A World of Difference* as the way "A is always already different from A." In the realm of law, this means that there is no ultimate authority, no system transcendentally grounded in truth. Rather, as Derrida describes in "Force of Law," what law must rigorously strive to repress (or "mystify") is its own lack of foundation, the way

in which any system of law is always dependent upon the violent performative imposition of the system. For a deconstructive approach to legal studies, see Drucilla Cornell and Tom Keenan.

²Louise K. Barnett in "Bartleby as Alienated Worker" also observes the mechanical nature of Bartleby's production, but she takes Bartleby to be representative of the plight of the proletariat. The question of Bartleby's "representativeness" in fact has dichotomized the bulk of the scholarship on the text into two categories: Marxist readings that take Bartleby to be representative of the alienation of the worker from the means of production and existentialist readings that take Bartleby to be representative of the alienating effects of modernity. In the first case, Bartleby's behavior is considered to be a response to the conditions under which he labors; in the second, to his empathic understanding of the meaninglessness of existence.

³Bruce R. Bickley, for instance, links "Bartleby" to Poe's "The Man of the Crowd," as part of the tradition of the "mysterious stranger" (30); Stanley Brodwin characterizes Bartleby as "living death itself" (177); Maurice Friedman observes that Bartleby is a man who has "placed himself outside the realm of the human" (68); Ronald Wesley Hoag characterizes Bartleby as a memento mori, an "abiding icon of death" (119), and refers to him (with unexamined Coleridgean overtones) as "dead-in-life" (127); J. Hillis Miller describes Bartleby in *Versions of Pygmalion* as a ghost (163-65).

⁴However, in contrast to Bartleby, it should be pointed out that the lawyer and his other employees use the verb "prefer" to express specific, positive preferences. Unlike Bartleby's negative "prefer not," the lawyer, for example, tells Nippers that, "I'd prefer that you would withdraw for the present" (31). Although Bartleby touches those around him, "unmans" them, infects them, he does not drain them entirely of their beliefs in personal autonomy and the efficacy of human action. In expressing positive preferences, those around Bartleby refuse his nihilism.

⁵That the lawyer is "turned into a pillar of salt," as is Lot's wife, as well as rendered "impotent" and "unmanned" by Bartleby's refusal, here raises the issue of gender. The narrator is of course correlating authority with masculinity—one is "unmanned" when one allows one's subordinates to dictate a course of action. However, what is intriguing about the narrator's choices of adjectives is that, in a sexual sense, the narrator as impotent and unmanned is rendered *unable to reproduce*. As I will develop below, Bartleby's potency ironically lies in his refusal to reproduce copy, that has the effect of turning others into copies of himself.

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