

Bartleby

H. Melville

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A lawyer in mid-nineteenth century New York needs to employ a number of employees, copyists and errand boys. There are no photo-copiers so original manuscripts have to be copied by hand. Obviously there are too few copies demanded to justify printing, i.e. setting of types. All the writing of documents, including copies, has to be performed in a neat hand, and be proof-read, tasks which are rather tedious as most necessary tasks are.

Into the office of the narrator comes Bartleby. Among the employees he is given a privileged position getting a desk inside the lawyers enclosure not partitioned out as the others, yet if somewhat screened off from view. At the desk he performs efficiently producing rapidly and competently the one written document after the other. So one day when asked to participate in a routine copy-check along with the others he simply refuses much to the surprise and concomitant consternation of his employer. His refusal is couched in such polite and gentle, yet firm terms that it cannot easily be challenged let alone gainsaid. 'I prefer not' he simply says, the meaning of which turns out to be simply I will not under any circumstances. Reluctant to make a scene right away, the narrator prefers to postpone the matter to a moment of future leisure and goes on with the work, asking his regular underlings for reassurance, promptly given. This incident turns out not to be isolated but the narrator will find out that it will be a standard reaction whenever he asks him for some trifle or personal service as if it would be below his dignity. Invariably his refusal is always couched in a mild manner and with the same tentative words 'I prefer not to do', but whose meaning nevertheless is one of categorical determination not to budge. It is almost as if a sexual favor has been asked and refused consistently out of the principle of physical integrity, a simple but non-negotiable non-consent.

Now Melville does not leave it at that, this would simply have been a presentation of a mild eccentricity, he turns the screw a few more twists in the manner of his fellow writer and one-time neighbor - Hawthorne - in the tradition of the Gothic tale, so popular at the time. Bartleby, this gentle scrivener with his tightly defined territory of personal integrity, extends this territory and domain of in-cooperation, by first refusing to work altogether, and then, as the narrator finds out by chance one fine Sunday morning, never leaving the premises but making it his permanent abode, during night as well as day. And just as he earlier had infused his refusal to co-operate with in-opposable authority he now turns out the rightful tenant of the premises at his own convenience. The narrator is amazed that he puts up with it, but so compelling are the demands of his employee to have his integrity respected that he finds himself unable but to consent. Thus he finds himself in the absurd position of having an employee who refuses to do any work yet unable to turn him out. He tries, however, never forcefully in keeping with the gentle insistence of his charge, but by bribery and appeal to the gentlemanly instincts of his evasive opponent. But in spite of their cleverness they invariably fail. He cannot feel any anger, beyond that of exasperation, and instead develops a certain compassion for the strange fellow, a

compassion not entirely devoid of curiosity. He tries in vain to win the confidence of the man, to find out where he comes from, what is his trouble, offering to help to return him from whence he came and assuring him that any letter of his for help and support will never remain unheeded nor unanswered. Eventually he is reduced to move house himself to another office-building, ostensibly to get closer to the City Hall. But eventually his discarded charge catches up with him. The new tenants of his old office, along with those of the building itself, come and complain about the man who never goes away, who turned out of the office still remains haunting the staircases leaning against the bannisters. They clearly think of it as the narrators responsibility. In the end the police is called to take him out and he is removed to jail. The narrator visits him, tries to be of service, but Bartleby is as evasive as ever. To any suggestion of help or offer of a service, he invariably responds 'I rather prefer not'. Eventually he is found dead, no doubt through sustained malnutrition, would one care to delve into the matter literally (with no income and refusal to accept any substantial offer of food, he surely must be heading for a premature extinction, man cannot live on air alone).

Now one may leave it as a Gothic tale, a narration of an eccentricity meant to distract the reader momentarily, maybe even to touch his heart and wring a tear or two. Sadness has such beauty and gives such sweet comfort as long as you are not directly involved. But there is always the possibility of a symbolic interpretation going beyond the mere surface of the literal tale, to seek for the source of its projection. One obvious one is to see it as a parable of the predicament of a literary man engaged in a creative quest. The absolute desire for personal integrity and total disregard for the petty demands of an everyday commercial society committed to usefulness. Maybe, as some critics speculate, an expression of Melville's own predicament as a literary artist. In more recent parlance, the demand for space.

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