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“Homeward Bound on a Circular Path to Nowhere”: A Reading of Herman Melville’s ‘Bartleby the Scrivener’

The strange vision projected to the reader in Melville’s ‘Bartleby the Scrivener’¹ is that of a finite human framework of unknowable blank forces, perplexingly repulsing all that is human, avoiding interpretation by calling attention to the reversibility and infinity of practically anything that can be said about the central problem. It is the power of blankness² that radiates from the text. It holds the story together and captivates the reader without submitting itself to rational analysis; it is as strong as the force caused by a vacuum that held together the famous Magdeburg hemispheres,³ and it is as difficult or hopeless to “pin down” as those hollow hemispheres were difficult or hopeless to separate. Having read ‘Bartleby the Scrivener,’ one feels like having swallowed a marble, which is

¹ The short story was published twice in Melville’s lifetime. First it appeared in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* in 1853, under the title: ‘Bartleby the Scrivener. A Story of Wall Street.’ A second, slightly revised version of the text with the shorter title: ‘Bartleby,’ was published in Melville’s collection of short stories, *The Piazza Tales*, in 1856. The text I use is that of the first version, which can be found in A. Walton Litz, ed., *Major American Short Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) pp. 169-202.

² As opposed to the “power of blackness” which fascinated Melville so much in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Dieter Meindl also calls attention to this in his manuscript, p. 126, for which see note 6, below.

³ The German physicist Otto von Guericke (1602-1686) invented one of the first vacuum pumps in 1650 to exhaust air from his famous Magdeburg hemispheres. These hollow hemispheres, approximately 22 inches in diameter, could be fitted together so well that air could be pumped out of them. The pressure of air on the outside walls of the hemispheres then forced them strongly together. In a demonstration before the German Emperor Ferdinand III, he harnessed 16 horses, four pairs to each hemisphere. They failed to pull the hemispheres apart.

smooth and shiny, representing totality and perfection in its form, yet indigestible. We become captives of a problem we can never solve and in the effort trying to understand it through re-reading and re-telling the story over and over again, our minds go blank. "Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable..." we read on the first page, and the sentence opens up a – real or illusory – possibility that through his strange figure (the) nothing is ascertainable. The last two (both ironic and desperate) exclamations in the story: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" remind us that there is much more at stake than the plight of an eccentric scrivener, a case so marginal and extreme that could serve only as an unsettling kind of anecdote: we have to face – as much as we are able – the faceless, timeless and universal problems of human existence and non-existence. But investigating nothing is – to say the least – a very dangerous enterprise. Before proceeding further, attention should be paid to Parmenides' warning: "... this I tell you is a path that cannot be explored: for you could neither recognise that which IS NOT, nor express it."⁴

So, instead of drawing a blank by turning the first and last pages over and over in our minds, perhaps we should pursue a more promising path to start the investigation. In 'Bartleby the Scrivener,' however, we find incomprehensibility concentrated in the form of a human being who is inside the "normal" world of the story (the law office in New York); consequently, it is not possible to see a path with a definite direction towards the chaos: we are forced to choose the circular road, a kind of orbit around the realm of unknowable forces, and thereby "bypass" the problem.

No wonder, since in Melville's story, the story of Bartleby the scrivener is never told. His mysteriously empty life and death is neatly wrapped up in the anecdotic style of the narrative by a narrator, the lawyer (unnamed in the text) who is the first one to step on the circular path mentioned above; in a way, the first reader of the last chapter of a non-existent story. Of course, he has to be dealt with cautiously: the point-of-view technique Melville uses as early as 1853 is a very cunning device. The Wall Street lawyer – being a human character – might be biased, limited and is inevitably fallible. Nevertheless, his rotating journey around Bartleby (basically characterised by repetition) is well worth following. In trying to interpret the strange phenomenon that confronts him, he is unable to give an account of more than what his "own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby," this copyist who gradually stops "functioning" without any comprehensible

⁴ *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, trans. Kathleen Freeman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962) p. 42.

reason apart from the fact that he “would prefer not to” proofread copies, run errands, answer questions, work, leave the place, accept money, act at all, eat, and nor, finally, live. The “vague report” by which the lawyer later learns about Bartleby’s former job at the Dead Letter Office makes the figure of the scrivener, if this is possible, even more obscure.

The case *presented* to the lawyer seems to be il-legal: it is without sufficient precedents and without sufficient consequences (i.e. in terms of the lawyer’s basic form and interpretation of life), each of his intellectual approaches towards it results in an intellectual withdrawal from it; thus, each time, he is forced to close a circle of thinking without moving a step forward in “concluding the matter” (i.e. finding a proper place for it in his own universe). The circles are vicious and the problem is a crucial one, especially nowadays, when the notion of meaning and the possibility of conclusions are so little taken for granted and are therefore so much of an issue. What Jean Baudrillard says about the present danger in the existence of “pure events” may be relevant here, concerning the case of Bartleby as a “catastrophe”:

When light is harnessed and engulfed by its own source, there occurs a brutal involution of time into the event itself. This is a catastrophe in a literal sense: an inflection or curvature that makes the origin of a thing coincide with its end, and re-turns the end onto the origin in order to annul it, leaving behind an event without precedents and without consequences – the pure event. This is also the catastrophe of meaning: the event without consequences is identified by the fact that every cause can be indifferently assigned to it, without being able to choose among them... Its origin is unintelligible and so is its destination.⁵

The case that the narrator presents, including his own reflections might also become a kind of “pure event”: although he provides the reader with a tremendous amount of redundant information about himself, his “story” (e.g. where he was born, what his family was like, how he became a lawyer) is just as much inaccessible as Bartleby’s.

This mid-nineteenth century anti-story has indeed become a most challenging one for literary critics, especially in the twentieth century. Since the “heart” of the story is empty, Bartleby criticism can be characterised by so much diversity and variety that almost anything is acceptable and nothing is satisfactory

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, ‘Fatal Strategies’ in Mark Poster, ed., *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (London: Polity Press, 1988) pp. 192-3.

concerning what the story might be a metaphor of. I would like to point out just a few interesting aspects of the "expressing, evolving, varied aggregate of Bartleby-criticism."⁶ Bartleby can be – and has been – seen as a rebel against, and a victim of, American business-like, money-making society,⁷ as a nihilistic rebel,⁸ as a lunatic, suffering from dementia praecox, as a mental case of catatonia or anorexia nervosa,⁹ as a new incarnation of Jesus Christ,¹⁰ as a representative of Derridean ecriture,¹¹ or as a symbol of death.¹² The story can be – and has been – further understood as a parable of Melville's own fate and the fate of the artist in Melville's epoch,¹³ as a prefiguration of modern absurdity¹⁴ and as a demonstration of the human situation itself¹⁵ – the line could be continued *ad infinitum*. "The tremendous potential of meaning heaped on Bartleby," says Dieter Meindl, "serves but to diversify the contours of the void which he figures in the tale."¹⁶

Nevertheless, the void, which resists interpretation, creates almost a necessity for the reader to enter the magnetic field around the enigma. I intend to give the text a relatively close reading, which will involve something like sharing

⁶ Dieter Meindl, *Melville's Most Metaphysical Story and the American Grotesque. A Survey of Criticism, an Interpretation and a Generic Classification of 'Bartleby'* (manuscript, 1990) p. 7. I had the privilege of getting access to this most remarkable forthcoming book from which I have learned a lot, and on the basis of which I made my brief critical summary. Parts of this manuscript are comprised in Chapter Three of Dieter Meindl, *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1996) pp. 63-103.

⁷ William M. Gibson, 'Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno"' in George Hendrick, ed., *The American Renaissance, the History of an Era: Essays and Interpretations* (Frankfurt am Main: Diesterweg, 1961) pp. 107-116.

⁸ Kingsley Widmer, 'The Negative Affirmation: Melville's "Bartleby"' *Modern Fiction Studies* 8 (1962) pp. 276-286.

⁹ Marvin Fisher, 'Bartleby: Melville's Circumscribed Scrivener' *Southern Review* 10 (1974), pp. 59-79.

¹⁰ H. Bruce Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods. Melville's Mythology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963). See especially pp. 126-136: 'Bartleby: The Ascetic's Advent'

¹¹ Monique Pruvot, 'Bartleby de Herman Melville: L'écriture et la loi' *Études Anglaises* 28 (1975) pp. 429-438.

¹² Norman Springer, 'Bartleby and the Terror of Limitation' *PMLA* 80 (1965) pp. 410-418; and Meindl, *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque*, especially pp. 63-103: 'Bartleby and Death.'

¹³ Leo Marx, 'Melville's Parable of the Walls' *Sewanee Review* 61 (1953) pp. 602-627.

¹⁴ Robert D. Spector, 'Melville's "Bartleby" and the Absurd' *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 16 (1961) pp. 175-177.

¹⁵ Newton Arvin, *Herman Melville* (New York: William Sloane, 1950).

¹⁶ Meindl, *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque* p. 64.

and observing the lawyer's absurd, existential "merry-go-round" experience because the "path to nowhere" which I choose to follow, is strictly circular, and will predominantly be intellectual instead of literal throughout. I would like to concentrate on the narrator's "circles" around the case and the figure of Bartleby – by which I mean instances of APPROACH and WITHDRAWAL which follow the course of events, the lawyer's line of thoughts and the changes in his basic attitude towards the (primarily philosophical) problem of whether or not a man in whom the void manifests itself can be regarded as a human being, and whether the void can be "humanised" through its representation in a human form.

When trying to think in circles, one must be aware of the dangers of "circular reasoning," and take into consideration what Martin Heidegger puts in the following way:

Formal objections, such as the argument of "circular reasoning," an argument that is always easily raised in the area of investigation of principles, are always sterile when one is weighing concrete ways of investigating. They do not offer anything to the understanding of the issue and they hinder penetration into the field of investigation.¹⁷

Keeping Heidegger's warning in mind (together with the words of Parmenides and the almost apocalyptic vision of Baudrillard), I return to the path of "circles," because I feel that only through the sterility of the perfect geometric figure can the innermost sterility of the American emptiness or void be discussed. Since the text offers a possibility to differentiate between stages of APPROACH and WITHDRAWAL (i.e. individual circles), each circle can be different from all the others. This might open up the possibility of covering most of the surface of a whole sphere around the void by circles of interpretation. The sphere thus created might serve as an atmosphere: it might enable us to breathe in the proximity of the void, it might enable us to find a way "home" through the circular paths (i.e. to find a proper place for the problem of the vacuum – without reducing it, and at the same time without being "vacuum-cleaned" out of our own universe). This is the challenge of the present paper.

I have divided the core of the story into three sections on the basis of the lawyer's attitude to Bartleby (three unsuccessful efforts, instances of APPROACH

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1977) p. 49.

and WITHDRAWAL, i.e. circles), which would constitute the three dimensions of the "sphere":

1. The first section, from Bartleby's appearance up to the point when the lawyer discovers that Bartleby actually lives in the office, can be characterised as an effort on the lawyer's part to incorporate Bartleby into his world, to think of him as an employee who is a "valuable acquisition," despite Bartleby's eccentricities. But living in the office is not just a matter of eccentric behaviour but is absurd and must be dealt with on a different level. The lawyer's first effort therefore proves a failure.

2. The second section, up to the point when the lawyer decides to move his office from the premises, testifies to the lawyer's attempt to get incorporated in the world of Bartleby, inspired by true "fraternal melancholy," since they are both "sons of Adam." This APPROACH fails because of the fear that he might succeed, i.e. the perfectly natural fear that he might become a kind of Bartleby and be absorbed into the void that Bartleby personifies.

3. In the third section, which ends with Bartleby's death, a NEGATIVE APPROACH (i.e. the inability to APPROACH, fleeing from the problem) can be observed, as the lawyer tries to forget the matter and "erase" the vacuum from his life - but this manoeuvre results in a NEGATIVE WITHDRAWAL (i.e. the inability to withdraw, but the compulsion to turn back to the problem again and again): no eraser, however, can clean a blank sheet of paper of its blankness.

These attitudes or dimensions (which might be called vertical, horizontal and spatial, respectively) give the three directions of the individual, concrete "circles," the instances of futile mental approach and withdrawal which are to be followed, "whirled through" and examined in the text. One more dimension is missing: that of time, which is provided by the narration itself, and the reflexive nature of telling the story. This can be best examined in the framework that the first paragraph, the five-page long introduction and the "sequel" in which the "vague report" is told establishes.

The structure of the story seems to allow the construction of an (atmo-)sphere for the "humanisation" of nothing through the sterile activity of dehumanisation, through the deconstruction of every individual effort, through the transformation of every situation into a wire of thought which can be bound into a circle. Yet, the question remains whether reading a story can ever be a "sterile activity," whether we can transform without being transformed, "getting our wires crossed," without inevitably and deeply (both painfully and blissfully)

entangling our lives with the human situations presented in the text into an organic knot which can never be undone. Equipped with all that has been said, we can now start reading.

It is time – our fourth dimension – of which the first sentence of the story reminds us: “I am a rather elderly man.” This utterance strikes the reader by being very short and concise (in contrast to the Dickensian flow of the following sentences), and it becomes significant in setting the situation, for it raises a kind of respect for someone who can certainly be experienced, and it categorises the narrator as a character (and distances him from Melville, who was thirty-four, about the age of Bartleby, when he wrote the story). What follows is the very well structured sketch of an anecdote to be told by the lawyer: a hint at his “more than ordinary contact” with scribes as such, then at the perplexing strangeness of the particular case, indicating that the non-existence of Bartleby’s story (“full and satisfactory biography”) is an “irreparable loss to literature.” (Despite the irony of the statement, the reader’s interest is captured here. We are “taken in” by the word *loss*, which causes our curiosity – and our final dissatisfaction, too, when we are confronted with a *lack* instead. I intend to return to this crucial difference.) Finally the lawyer draws the net of mystery around the figure by mentioning the “vague report” whose content will be revealed later in the story. With this, he succeeds in engaging us totally in the topic while distancing and, in a way, alienating himself from the phenomenon. It is a commonplace that time heals wounds: with the help of this dimension the crucial riddle becomes so story-like that we secretly hope to be given a solution at the end by the narrator who, without being omniscient, still knows something we do not yet know. Time, for the lawyer, seems to have provided the problem of the vacuum with a “common place” – in the comfortable distance of the anecdote. But, no matter how cosy it may be, the common place can never become a “home” – and this can be felt in the lawyer’s self-introduction as well as in the description of his office chambers.

His self-introduction is by no means attractive: “a man who” is “filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best,” who “in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat” does “a snug business among rich men’s bonds, and mortgages, and title deeds” does not sound to be the ideal, daring lawyer whose “prudence” and “method” one would blindly trust. On top of all that, he seems much too money-conscious and self-confident – although the sentence, “All who know me consider me an eminently safe man,” and the frequent allusions to “the late John Jacob Astor” indicate that his security is strongly dependent on his

“connections.” Strangely enough, he is the one who starts the sequence of negations in the story – at least grammatically – because, a surprising number of times, he uses the negative instead of the affirmative construction (in a direct or indirect way), basically in statements in connection with Astor, the millionaire: “a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm had no hesitation in pronouncing...,” “I was not unemployed by...,” “I was not insensible to...,” etc. Can this (involuntary?) negativity suggest that this man is infected by a kind of scepticism which has become encoded into him by the form of life his social role dictates; can it be a warning sign, that, although he is the “first reader” of *Bartleby’s* story, his eyes will never be open to the somewhat innocent freshness of a first reading? He probably feels it redundant to burden the reader with his own personal “history” – this way the self-introduction becomes “hygienic”: his thoughts and feelings concerning *Bartleby* manage to hide his “flesh and blood.”

The description of the office chambers is essential from the point of view of the central imagery of the story – that of walls (already hinted at by the subtitle: “A Story of Wall Street”). The windows of the “premises” provide a blank view, indeed, one of them “looking upon the white wall of a spacious skylight shaft,” the other on a “lofty brick wall, black by age.” The whole “universe” of the story is squeezed into these dim-lit, stuffy and claustrophobic chambers, and the scene strikingly lacks any breath of American spaciousness and vastness in all possible connotations, forming a startling contrast with the adventurous life and practically the whole oeuvre of Melville. “It reminds one of no other American story,” observes Newton Arvin, “... if it reminds one of anything, it is of some tale by Gogol or Dostoyevsky...”¹⁸ Indeed, the setting and the cosmic absurdity of the story would perhaps fit more into a Russian or East European setting. However, the dehumanising effect of the environment is not alien to the American mind, either. “Much of the imagery in *Bartleby* is related to popular sensational literature,” says David S. Reynolds, comparing the story with George Foster’s *New York Slices* (1849). Foster writes: “Wall Street! Who shall fathom the depth and rottenness of thy mysteries? Has Gorgon passed through thy winding labyrinth, turning with his smile every thing to stone .. hearts as well as houses?” In Wall street, Foster continues, man has erected huge stone temples to “the one god – Mammon.” Through the labyrinthine chambers of buildings

¹⁸ Arvin p. 242.

rush throngs of people "as if they went whirling about in some gigantic puppet-show, while a concealed hand pulled convulsively at the wire."¹⁹

The "puppets" of the lawyer's story remain to be introduced: the two clerks and the office-boy, "First, Turkey, second, Nippers, third, Ginger Nut." (Now, for the third time in the text the narrator introduces a catalogue – it might indicate his need meticulously to categorise, to put everything he encounters in his life to its proper place.) The anecdotic style of description, the jovial attitude towards the eccentricities of these people who have only nicknames, is a necessity. It is essential for the lawyer in his desperate efforts to make at least the tone in the office more friendly. This common place has to be intimate to some extent, since the private lives of the characters – all men – seem to be totally insignificant. In fact, what they are actually engaged in, the meaning, the target or whatever is at stake in their work (except money and position) does not seem to be of much importance, either. What we get a glimpse of is their pseudo-home, the private side of their office life. Despite all the lawyer's witty remarks, the kind of all-inclusive, genuine humour, which would be the best defence against dehumanisation is absent. The average lawyer keeps control over his clerks, whose fits, by the law of averages, "relieve each other, like guards." Turkey and Nippers take turns in losing their temper, and this way they provide every day with its unique rhythm. By complementing each other, they provide the story with a balance; they become the measure of *time*, and, later, of the lawyer's personal sanity. The stable "zero" their oddities add up to, on the imaginary scales, becomes the standard of normality in the life of the Wall Street office. Before the "advent" of *Bartleby*, there is a certain symmetry in the arrangement of the characters: Ginger Nut, the office boy, for whom "the noble science of law" is "contained in a nutshell," is twelve years old, Nippers, suffering from "ambition" and "indigestion" is twenty-five; and Turkey, the caricature of the lawyer as an "elderly man," is around sixty. The stages of a human life-span are in a way represented by their ages, "fossilising" the form of the office life by stressing its perenniality and eternity. The lawyer as puppeteer can observe this circle from the outside, although by taking up the role of the employer, he, too, has to share the life-form which identifies people with functions (or at best, anecdotic stereotypes) instead of admitting their complex, genuine and unique identities.

¹⁹ David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance. The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988) pp. 294-5.

After these introductory pages, the lawyer and the reader can feel well-prepared for the first encounter with the "motionless young man" appearing on the office threshold, answering the lawyer's advertisement, "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn": Bartleby. A kind of duality of action and non-action on his part can already be observed here – since he must have decided to apply for the job. (As if he were silently stating (somewhat echoing the lawyer): "I would prefer not to be unemployed." And the lawyer immediately employs him, without asking for a resumé – quite in contrast with the demands of American efficiency.)

1. The case of Bartleby, thanks to the time-dimension, first appeared as an event in the past, then as an event in the future – now that he is present, the problem no longer enjoys the protection of time, so a new dimension is needed for investigation. This is the starting point of the lawyer's circles of APPROACH and WITHDRAWAL – now on the "vertical" level, trying to fit the scrivener's figure into the social pattern of his normal, everyday life.

1.1. His first impression of Bartleby is positive. He calls him "uniquely sedate" but, perhaps already governed by some kind of an uneasiness, he instinctively places (misplaces?) him at a relatively safe distance. The scrivener is alienated first from the other clerks, then from the narrator (although within easy call). He is situated in the lawyer's own room, by the folding doors, separated with "a high green folding screen which might entirely isolate Bartleby" from his sight. In this way, the narrator draws a kind of magic circle around the new scrivener, before any kind of personal contact could develop between them.

1.2. The next short section is that of observation, of a slow intellectual APPROACH: "At 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." The metaphors of eating show the importance of Bartleby's internalisation of the documents, and, in a way, of the world of the office.²⁰ This is doubtless an activity, requiring a great effort, but it is done "silently, palely, mechanically," in a passive way, so to say. This kind of productivity cannot make the lawyer happy, it results in his own spiritual WITHDRAWAL.

1.3. On the third day of Bartleby's stay in the office, the first confrontation occurs. The lawyer, in "haste and natural expectancy of instant

²⁰ cf. Thomas Dana Cohen, *Hyperbaton: Essays in Dialogue, and the Materiality of Inscription: Plato, Bakhtin, Melville* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1989).

compliance" (which, for him, is a totally normal APPROACH to a clerk in his office), calls the scrivener to proofread a copy, to examine, to "verify the accuracy" of a piece of writing, which in the narrator's own words is "a very dull, wearisome and lethargic affair." Now, for the first time, Bartleby utters the words for which he is remembered world-wide: "I would prefer not to." This utterance presupposes a personal choice, which, in the given situation, in the form of life in which Bartleby is supposed to participate, is not supposed to exist. Employees cannot choose not to comply – if they do, it is understood as a complete refusal. Such a refusal would be in sharp contrast with the "mild, firm voice" and the "sedateness" the lawyer had previously observed, so his natural first reaction is that the scrivener cannot have heard the request right. He repeats himself – and so does Bartleby. The second reaction of the lawyer is anger: "What do you mean? Are you moonstruck?" But the third repetition of the strange sentence creates a serious gap: if Bartleby were one of his clerks—in other words, if he participated in the lawyer's form of life—such a disobedience would result in dismissal. But Bartleby's basic standards seem to be different, and the lawyer is unable to step out of his own world to accept them. (Being human, after all, how could he do that?) Nevertheless, he feels and accepts the difference, and consequently has to regard Bartleby's behaviour as non-human: "as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors." (The lawyer does not realise that Cicero, in fact, has been expelled from this office long ago, and eloquence has already been muted into plaster-of-paris.)

Such a confrontation with the irrational can only result in a "gaze" – but the lawyer's practical mind has to WITHDRAW from the absurdity, he has to "place" Bartleby in the human world of the office again (after all, it might have been just a temporary aberration on the scrivener's part, perhaps he just failed to "plug in" this time). The narrator accepts the strangeness of the matter but "concludes to forget" it for the time being. The dilemma, which later turns cosmic, is already enunciated, in a concentrated form, here, in the circle of the first confrontation.

1.4. "A few days after this..." (note that time in this part of the story is almost always measured by the day – this strengthens the feeling of repetition in the text but, never being concrete, also disrupts our sense of time: we never find out how long the Bartleby-period lasts in the lawyer's life). So, "A few days after this, Bartleby concluded four lengthy documents" – and the first confrontation is repeated, this time witnessed by the three other employees, as well. The lawyer

turns to Bartleby with the same “normal” APPROACH, wanting him to verify the copies, and, hearing the scrivener’s “regular” answer, he first “turns into a pillar of salt,” then he asks the reason for what he regards as refusal. (The why-question comes up relatively late in his mind, only after the fourth “I would prefer not to” in the story.) A refusal has to have a reason but a preference, being an expression of volition, might not. Bartleby’s answer – the repetition of his sentence – might be all right according to his (indecipherable) standards, but by stressing the strange difference, he deepens the gap: the lawyer becomes “disarmed,” “touched,” and “disconcerted.” He suddenly starts reasoning with the scrivener, wanting to convince him from the perspective of common sense. He gets the same answer, “in a flute-like tone” : in Bartleby’s standards there seems to be no place for logical argumentation. All the more misleading it is that the scrivener presents his conclusion as a result of careful consideration, as a decision, as if he took a stand in favour of one of at least two possibilities. His absurd inner freedom of choice turns the concept and myth of the infinite number of opportunities America offers to a free citizen inside out. In vain does the lawyer try to insert Bartleby as a fourth item into his set of eccentric clerks – with him, there seems to be no common ground for playing the employer-employee game. The lawyer now begins to “stagger in his own plainest faith.” He WITHDRAWS and turns to the other three clerks, the “disinterested persons,” “for some reinforcement”: He gets the reassuring answers but these – despite their educational intent – fail to move Bartleby. One more circle is closed, and the dilemma is postponed again by the lawyer.

1.5. In the next section, before a new APPROACH, the narrator tries to observe Bartleby’s ways once more in order to find some explanation for his behaviour. There is not much to be observed except that the scrivener never seems to leave the office, and he seems to eat nothing else but ginger nuts (the “small, flat, round and very spicy” cakes – after which the office boy got his nickname, since it is him who brings them to all the clerks, including Bartleby). The lawyer’s “reveries concerning the probable effects upon the human constitution of living entirely on ginger nuts” brilliantly illustrate the absurdity of reasoning and the need to turn the matter into an anecdote: “Ginger, then had no effect upon Bartleby. Probably he preferred it should have none.”

The narrator, a bit relieved by his own good humour, now tries to approach Bartleby from a “not inhumane” standpoint, stating that the scrivener’s eccentricities are involuntary, and, after all, they can get along. This is the first

instance of pity on the lawyer's part (for the first time, he calls Bartleby a "poor fellow"), although we can see the traces of the mercantile aspect of piety in this paragraph: "Here I can purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby, to humour him in his strange wilfulness will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience." But the lawyer seems to have underestimated his task and overestimated his pious charity (the only sweet morsels in this story, that of the ginger nuts, are consumed by Bartleby). The lawyer's practical common sense gets the upper hand and, after WITHDRAWING ("The passiveness of Bartleby sometimes irritated me"), he cannot resist the temptation of an "evil impulse" (or of normal curiosity) to test Bartleby's passive resistance in a new APPROACH.

1.6. Trying to find the limits of the scrivener's tolerance, he starts acting like a naughty child, playing on the nerves of the "adult": he deliberately thinks of things Bartleby would surely prefer not to do, and addresses him with these requests, one after the other. The curiosity he is driven by also resembles that of a scientist experimenting with a strange compound, actually having the results he wants in mind, still wanting to see the proof, to "verify." He "stages" the scenes and again asks his clerks' opinion for reassurance – a kind of "verification": after all, this is their normal duty. (By Nippers' reserved answer and Turkey's "combativeness," the reader can tell that all this happens in the afternoon, counterbalancing one of the previous circles which took place in the morning.) It is amazing that nothing can make Bartleby lose his temper, he (and the kind of void he personifies) seems to have no memory at all. Every time he starts from scratch and answers so mildly and firmly as if he had never been asked to do anything against his preferences before. "Like a very ghost, agreeably to the laws of magical invocation..." (perhaps the only laws in terms of which, for the time being, he can be defined), "at the third summons, he appears..." It is this stubborn mildness that puzzles, annoys, disarms, later even "unmans" the lawyer. Perhaps it is not so much the fact of irrationality, of meaninglessness (shall we say: nothingness?) that troubles and shocks the narrator and the reader, keeping them on circular paths – it is rather the fact that there has to be something "ordinarily human" about Bartleby, that the blank, mechanical, unalterable answer comes out of a human body (not a malfunctioning Xerox machine), in a human way (as a result of a decision). The ambiguities of Bartleby (his activity and passivity, his human face and non-human reactions) paralyse the lawyer, depriving him of his famous "prudence" and "method," of his ability to decide. "Suffering much from

perplexity and distress of mind" (and hunger, since it is close to his dinner hour), the lawyer again leaves it at that and WITHDRAWS, unable to think of any "terrible retribution" for the obstinacy of the scrivener. "Shall I acknowledge it?" he asks himself – and his problem is more and more like an educational dilemma (now from the adult's point of view, with a sense of inherent responsibility: how much of disobedience should the "parent" or "teacher" tolerate?)

1.7. He decides to be permissive, bringing himself to a kind of reconciliation: he tries to APPROACH Bartleby again, by thinking of him as a "valuable acquisition," and making a list of all his merits: his steadiness, his incessant industry (although we get the first hint at the scrivener's standing "dead-wall reveries") and, above all, his honesty, in which the lawyer has a "singular confidence." Although he sometimes forgets and complains about the whims of the scrivener, he is on his way to get accustomed to the new way things are arranged in his office and to accepting Bartleby as an exceptional example of the "somewhat singular set of men: law copyists or scriveners." However, Bartleby never ceases to surprise him, and the WITHDRAWAL that is caused by a true shock has to be dealt with at a different dimensional level.

2. This new dimension is "horizontal" – since the lawyer has to change his role of boss for that of neighbour. Seeing Bartleby in shirt-sleeves in the office "one Sunday morning" is something too intimate and too absurd to be tolerated. The shift in roles is also demonstrated by the existence of a literally (physically) circular path: the lawyer, in his disturbed state of mind, acts upon the scrivener's strange advice and obediently walks round the block "two or three times" (whereas he only wanted to "walk round to" his chambers on the way to church). He feels and acts like an unexpected visitor, although he knows that he would have every right to enter his own office and turn Bartleby out of doors. The dilemma again resembles that of distressed teachers or parents when confronted with a problem-child. Feeling the burdensome weight of responsibility and the strength of their child's obstinacy and not knowing what they have done wrong to provoke it, they become weak and surrender to all kinds of whims. Whatever the lawyer does in such a state will be an "impotent rebellion against the mild effrontery." Here again we can see passivity and activity conjoined: Bartleby's gradual withdrawal from society is at the same time a gradual intrusion into the world around him. The lawyer feels "un-manned," i.e. both weakened and touched by something (or somebody?) "non-human." This symptom shows that his assimilation (or "initiation"?) into the world of Bartleby has begun.

2.1. This existential uneasiness can only be relieved by an “uneasiness” “as to what Bartleby could possibly be doing in the office in his shirt-sleeves and in an otherwise dismantled condition of a Sunday morning.” Here both humour and common sense help to restore the lawyer to himself; humour, because even the slightest allusion in the form of a banished thought to Bartleby’s possible immorality (e.g. his having a mistress) has comic effects, and common sense, because the lawyer’s responsibility finds its proper direction again: he is, first and foremost, responsible for the office for which he pays the rent and not for its strange inhabitant. In this state of mind, he is now ready for a new APPROACH: he returns to the office – and finds it empty. But the emptiness is full of signs of life which indicate that Bartleby actually “has been making his home here, keeping bachelor’s hall all by himself.” The sight of the scrivener’s “rolled blanket,” “blacking box and brush,” “tin basin,” “soap,” “ragged towel” and the remainders of his breakfast in a newspaper (“a few crumbs of ginger nuts and a morsel of cheese”) results in the lawyer’s sudden twinge of “overpowering, stinging” “fraternal melancholy.” (Indeed, the best ground for true fraternal feelings is an encounter with one’s own human weakness through the exposed, defenceless misery of somebody else. In other words, the realisation that the other is also a human being with the same biological functions and insignificant, though essential, utensils. Perhaps we are already on our way to “love our enemies,” i.e. accept them as human beings when we imagine their vulnerability exposed to us through innocent objects such as their “ragged towels.”) The lawyer is deeply moved by the “miserable friendlessness and loneliness” he has just come upon, and what he finds most horrifying and pitiable is his own desolate image of Wall Street by night and on holidays: “Think of it. Of a Sunday, Wall Street is as deserted as Petra, and every night of every day it is an emptiness. This building, too, which of week-days hums with industry and life, at nightfall echoes with sheer vacancy and all through Sunday is forlorn.” This description reminds one of Foster’s *New York Slices* again, except that the lawyer here makes a sharp distinction between daylight and night-time. According to Michel Foucault, the classical period of thinking introduced the idea that the ability to make this sharp distinction is in a way the condition of one’s sanity: “The circle of day and night is the law of the classical world: the most reduced but the most demanding of the world’s necessities, the most inevitable but the simplest of nature’s legalities.”²¹

²¹ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans., Richard Howard (New York: Tavistock Publications Ltd., 1967) p. 109.

Foucault seems to suggest that the gap of silence between reason and unreason originates in classical thinking:

More effectively than any other kind of rationalism, better in any case than our positivism, classical rationalism could watch out for and guard against the subterranean danger of unreason, that threatening space of an absolute freedom.²²

All this is important because it might happen that the lawyer in fact turns back to the central image or “law” of the stronghold of reason in order to exorcise unreason from *Bartleby*. In this way, he can comfortably rely on “the common bond of humanity” between them. At the same time, his own fantasy grows to a gigantic scope and he imagines “the scrivener’s pale form” “laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding-sheet,” which fancyings he himself confesses to be “chimeras, doubtless, of a sick and silly brain” – this shows that, at least at this point, the bond between them is based upon unreason.

In his imaginings, the lawyer almost forgets that he is standing in his own office (and not trespassing in *Bartleby*’s home). As a counter-effect to his sentimentality, he does something led by curiosity that is in fact an intrusion into the scrivener’s privacy. He is “attracted by *Bartleby*’s desk” and opens the drawers, in order to find more of those “secret objects” that would give him a clue to the *Bartleby*-riddle and testify to the scrivener’s human fragility. What he actually finds is an “old bandana handkerchief, heavy and knotted” – with a savings’ bank inside. With the appearance of money, the magic attraction of *Bartleby*’s belongings disappears, and the lawyer’s generous approach, after having recalled in his memory everything concerning the scrivener, slowly turns into a WITHDRAWAL. He says: “just in proportion as the forlornness of *Bartleby* grew and grew to my imagination, did ... melancholy merge into fear, ... pity into repulsion.” He explains his changed feelings by the “hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill” and he wisely adds: “if such pity cannot lead to effectual succour, common sense bids the soul be rid of it.” (It will turn out that listening to his common sense is in fact much more difficult than complying with *Bartleby*’s crazy wishes, e.g. walking round the block, since the lawyer at this moment is only about halfway through with his circles.) He diagnoses *Bartleby* as “the victim of innate and incurable disorder,” i.e. a madman, realising that “it is his soul that suffers and his soul (he can) not reach.”

²² Foucault p. 84.

This whole circle of approach and withdrawal rests on the presupposition that Bartleby's soul suffers. The presupposition is absolutely normal and natural: who would think that a human being can be happy with a life like Bartleby's? Yet the basic problem lies here: we never get proof of Bartleby's sufferings or misery – the scrivener never complains about anything and seems content and balanced, which is in total accordance with his inaccessible and strange way of life. (As we shall see, his sterile, two-directional, irresistible movement – withdrawing from and intruding into the world around him – is definitely linear, not circular, and there is something firm about him that suggests that he is not a problem for himself but only for us). Help of any kind can only be given to someone in need of it. Bartleby does not seem to be in need of anything. In fact, nothing else seems to be “ordinarily human” in him but his pale body – this is why we cannot suppress our presupposition that he is vulnerable, exposed to our mercy and care, that he is enshrouded in a deep sadness; in other words, that he is a human being. The lawyer compares him to Marius, the ancient Roman warrior, who, after losing fame and glory, became a fugitive among the ruins of Carthage. This image is behind the lawyer's presupposition that, in Bartleby's case, he is confronted with a loss, something irreparable but still human, that Bartleby has his own – probably very sad and moving – story. But since this presupposed story – or history – is inaccessible, we have to accept that what we are confronted with is a *lack*. In the case of a loss (e.g. the plight of Marius) we always feel the weight of the values that are at stake and that are finally lost. In the case of a lack, we ourselves try to provide whatever is missing with a weight, a counterbalance to the void. Because without the presupposition of a loss, a lack would never even be felt: we cannot miss what we do not, in a certain sense, know of. We have not forgotten Parmenides' warning: “that which IS NOT,” is neither recognisable nor expressible. The simple fact that Bartleby has a human body is the very condition for us to recognise the lack, the void. The “sheer vacancy” of Bartleby's expression leads us to the perception of some kind of a sterile, inorganic nothingness – pure and perfect, so exact that it is almost tangible. Bartleby's human body is a straightforward, free and brave – American – presentation of the non-human, of the inconceivable nothingness that after all, exists in all of us.²³

This is the frightening reverse of the experience of “fraternal melancholy” – because instead of a “common bond,” we feel the magnetic attraction of the

²³ I wish to thank my husband, Géza Kállay, who, in our many conversations, called my attention to the essential problem of presuppositions.

vacuum. The lawyer, now terror-stricken, no longer wants to postpone the matter (although, from now on, he will be “forced” to do so): the thought of Bartleby’s incurable insanity leads him to the conclusion that – after a probably unsuccessful attempt at asking him questions – he will, as gently as possible, have to dismiss him.

2.2. It is no longer curiosity but necessity that drives the lawyer to a new APPROACH: he is now craving for a proof of his own humanity through trying to find the human in Bartleby. The questions he asks (while the scrivener keeps “his glance fixed upon” the already familiar “bust of Cicero”) are all basically humane, they all concern Bartleby’s story. “At present, I prefer to give no answer,” the scrivener replies, and the word “prefer” has an immense power here: it suggests that Bartleby knows his own story, he is not unable to relate it (i.e. he is not mentally ill) but after some consideration he decides that he would prefer not to share his story with the lawyer. “To keep something to oneself is the most incredible and thought provoking power,” says Jacques Derrida in his essay *How to Avoid Speaking*.²⁴ Bartleby seems to be filled with this power, in his manner, while the lawyer feels his efforts at communication have been treated with disdain. Of course, he is annoyed, but “something superstitious” forbids him to do anything against Bartleby and drives him to be even more friendly, now only wanting to hear a reassuring word that the scrivener might be willing to change his eccentric behaviour. “At present, I would prefer not to be a little reasonable,” answers Bartleby absurdly, and the second occurrence of the expression “at present” again suggests the promise of a speech that has to be, so to say, “well deserved.” It is a challenge now for the lawyer to “deserve” the bridge over the gap of silence, but he realises how seriously he has been affected by the scrivener: he and all his clerks have got into the habit of using the word “prefer.” The thought that the Bartleby-disease is contagious horrifies him, so he WITHDRAWS (and, in fact, warns both of his clerks to “withdraw” in this passage), again deciding that he must get rid of the “demented scrivener.”

2.3. The next section begins with a new – though not wholly unexpected – shock, which is the most absurd of all, and which forms the empty heart of the story: Bartleby says that he has “decided upon doing no more writing.” When the lawyer asks for a reason, his reply is a question, again thwarting the narrator in

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, ‘How to avoid Speaking: Denials’ in Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *Languages of the Unsayable. The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) p. 18.

his quest for Bartleby's humanity: "Do you not see the reason for yourself?" Now, strangely enough, it is the scrivener's utterance that presupposes something common between them – it suggests that the lawyer is capable of seeing the reason, that the reason (in fact, of unreason) "hits him in the eye." The lawyer is so dazzled by such a paradox that he projects his own troubled sight into Bartleby's "impaired vision." In this way, he can APPROACH the scrivener again: he can be touched by him, feel sorry for him, he can also postpone facing the unfaceable. But when Bartleby informs him that he has permanently given up writing, the lawyer becomes so much confronted with absurdity that, from a certain point of view, no difference exists for him between reason and unreason any longer.

Any attempt at keeping his identity would result in unreason – a proof that he is not only infected by but actually has become a kind of Bartleby. Turning a blind eye to the "fixture" in his chamber, as if Bartleby's presence were an accident, like a small blot of ink on a sheet of paper or a crack in the wall not worth mentioning, would be, in a way, rational and comfortable: he could maintain the rhythm of the office-life, he could pay more attention to the "necessities of business," disregarding the existence of the living statue – but this, of course, would be just as much an absurd choice of non-action as Bartleby's "passive resistance." In this respect, the situation he is (or rather both of them are) trapped in foreshadows the helpless inertia of humans recognised by the state of the world more than a century later, in our own times. Stanley Cavell, in *The Avoidance of Love*, writes the following:

What we do not know is what there is to acknowledge, what it is I am to make present, what I am to make myself present to. I know there is inexplicable pain and death everywhere, and now if I ask myself why I do nothing, the answer must be, I choose not to. That is, doing nothing is no longer something which has a place insured by ceremony, it is the thing I am doing. And it requires the same energy, the same expense of cunning and avoidance, that tragic activity used to have to itself.²⁵

But the deliberate choice (or preference) of non-action is precisely what the lawyer dreads; he wants to act, and the only possible action is Bartleby's dismissal. However, without any comprehensible reason, he is paralysed by a strong feeling

²⁵ Stanley Cavell, 'The Avoidance of Love. A Reading of *King Lear*' in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) p. 346.

of guilt, the kind which, according to Cavell, might be one of the consequences of “deifying” reason:

The point of reason, the thing that made it seem worth deifying, was not simply that it provided a god-like power but that it could serve to rationalise and hence to minimise distress. But the consequence of its uses, since no one is responsible for them – that is no one more than anyone else – is that it has made everything require an answer, and only I have the answer that is no one has it if I have not. And if I have not, I am guilty, and if I have, and do not act upon it, I am guilty. What we forgot when we deified reason, was not that reason is incompatible with feeling, but that knowledge requires acknowledgement.²⁶

The lawyer feels personal guilt both for the existence of the irrational and for his failure to do something about it. He wants to know and he is unable to acknowledge. This is no snug business any longer: he, once so good at making things profitable, now simply cannot find any grist to his “millstone-necklace.” (Were he living a few decades later, perhaps Friedrich Nietzsche could convince him that “the irrationality of a thing is not an argument against its existence, rather a condition of it.”²⁷) He wants to relieve himself by handing Bartleby over to a “relative or friend” – but such persons do not exist. Bartleby “seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe. A bit of wreck in the mid-Atlantic.” The image of the sea, recalling Melville’s whole oeuvre, and the word “universe” (quite unusual in the lawyer’s vocabulary) indicate that this is a crucial point in the story. For the reader, this image suddenly reveals a disturbing similarity between the situation of the enigmatic scrivener, the baffled narrator and the writer himself at a loss. For one moment, Bartleby, the lawyer and Melville are organically brought together in a genuine “bit of wreck,” like the one in Coleridge’s *The Rhymer of the Ancient Mariner*²⁸ but for them, the tragic experience remains a never actualised possibility. The image works like an electric shock: the lawyer immediately WITHDRAWS, telling Bartleby that “in six days’ time he must unconditionally leave the office.”

²⁶ This is followed by a sentence in brackets, which I feel relevant to quote here: “(The WITHDRAWALS and APPROACHES of God can be looked upon as tracing the history of our attempts to overtake and absorb acknowledgement by knowledge, God would be the name of that impossibility.)” Cavell p. 347.

²⁷ R. J. Hollingdale, ed., *A Nietzsche Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1987) p. 198.

²⁸ Cf. “Alone, alone, all, all alone / Alone on a wide wide sea! / And never a saint took pity on / My soul in agony.”

2.4. A new circle opens as the lawyer buttons up his coat in a kind of blindfolded, desperately bold effort to be the “boss” again. Although he should know from experience that commands and orders do not usually reach Bartleby, he wants to trust the performative power of his own words so much that in the act of dismissal he repeats “you must” three times, as if a spell could expel the apparition from his office, as if this “must” meant not only that Bartleby “will leave” but actually that he “has already left” the premises. But such power cannot be in his mortal possession. This section seems to be a battle between modal expressions: “must,” followed by “assume” on the lawyer’s side, and “prefer” on Bartleby’s. The lawyer APPROACHES Bartleby – not the man but the solution to the problem – with an extra sum of money (a painfully generous offer according to his standards), but the thirty-two dollars remain untouched and the walls of the empty office falsely reverberate his kind but serious departing words. The wordless Bartleby now stands “like the last column of some ruined temple” – and the image strangely recalls a former one, when the lawyer confronted the scrivener for a second time (see 1.4.), saying: “For a few minutes, I was turned into a pillar of salt, standing at the head of my seated column of clerks.” Without noticing what he admits, the lawyer’s present words imply that the temple – now ruined – is his own office, from which the iconic arrangement of him and his clerks has been wiped out, precisely by the power of the single sign that is left of them as a reminder – or merely a remainder. But the lawyer now, in a mood governed by musts and assumptions, is insensitive to the implications of his own images, since he is busy congratulating himself for his “masterly management.” “The beauty of my procedure seemed to consist in its perfect quietness... Without loudly bidding Bartleby depart – as an inferior genius might have done – I assumed the ground that depart he must, and upon that assumption built all I had to say.”

However, the lawyer himself soon has his doubts concerning the success of his procedure and he keeps “veering about.” As the comic episode in the street reveals, he is so much obsessed with his vacillation that, for a moment, he thinks that Bartleby’s stay or departure is the only thing that matters for everybody in Broadway. When he finds the office door closed and hears Bartleby’s voice from within (“Not yet, I am occupied”), he says he is “thunderstruck.”

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 someone touched him, when he fell.

This emblematic little story about the country man is the "capsule" of an American ballad: the man killed in his home, who has been exposed to the unforeseeable whims of nature, could have, so to say, an organic experience of an original "pure event," following which he died. Consequently, his plight itself did not become a pure event but a tragedy: it turned into a living story. Fortunately, Benjamin Franklin soon invented the lightning conductor, thus depriving humanity of the tragic experience of being thunderstruck. (Melville himself treats this problem in one of the stories close to *Bartleby* in *Piazza Tales*: "The Lightning-Rod Man.") So the lawyer's not wholly unexpected metaphorical thunderbolt has no real consequences: learning from his former experience, he automatically walks round the block once more (without even being asked to do so), and, trodding the literal circular path, he WITHDRAWS from solving the problem by deciding to "argue the matter over with *Bartleby* again."

2.5. "Reading *Bartleby* can appear an almost nauseating exercise,"²⁹ says Thomas Dana Cohen, and we might be very tempted to agree after all these rounds with the lawyer on his absurd roundabout. Both that the story can be further twisted, and that it will eventually come to an end seem unbelievable at this point. We have to "whirl through" another APPROACH, starting with a reproach (in the manner of the baffled and hurt parent or teacher again), followed by questions concerning *Bartleby's* departure (in the flow of which the lawyer gets more and more upset); the scrivener's utterance "I would prefer not to quit you" wrapped in silence; and finally the lawyer's passionate but impotent rebellion in WITHDRAWAL, recalling the notorious murder case of the "unfortunate Adams and the still more unfortunate Colt."³⁰ His latent but ardent wish for *Bartleby* not to exist almost makes him lose his temper. What prevents him from committing such an ill-considered act is his moral education.

2.6. He starts the new APPROACH with "the divine injunction": "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another." (The choice of the word "injunction," its dry, formal, official overtone, surprises the reader – although, for the lawyer, the legal term might be the only appropriate expression. For us, an "injunction" sounds to be indifferent to the circumstance whether our

²⁹ Cohen p. 463.

³⁰ "John Colt ... was convicted for the Broadway office murder of Samuel Adams and on the day scheduled for his hanging ... committed suicide in prison." Reynolds p. 177.

obedience is wholehearted or mechanical. The injunction is followed by the enactment of the "wise and prudent principle" of "sweet charity," which prevents the lawyer from "diabolical murder," and which changes his anger to pity and benevolence. But is sweet charity the same as love? Can love ever become a prudent principle? Can philanthropy make the lawyer love Bartleby? Not at all. Guided by prudent principles of his moral education, the most the lawyer can achieve is tolerance. He tolerates the existence of the motionless scrivener very similarly to the way one tolerates the existence of a harmless spider in the corner of his room, because his repulsion for extinguishing life (in general) is stronger than his repulsion for the insect itself. But all this has nothing to do with love. For a definition of love, the lawyer could consult Saint Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*, where he could read: "Love is the fulfilling of the law."³¹ But the fact that the divine "corpus juris" consists of one and only one paragraph, so Paul implies, with not a moral but an ontological basis, which can only be authentically fulfilled by God himself, and cannot be circumscribed in comprehensible sentences, the fact that the only law is that "we shall obey the law," is impossible to conceive rationally, especially for a lawyer. (Without recognising and acknowledging himself in Bartleby and Bartleby in himself, the lawyer can never "love" the scrivener - but paradoxically enough, such a recognition would probably work like the Virginian lightning strike of long ago and result in the lawyer's tragic death or mere disintegration.) The lawyer consoles himself with the thoughts of Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Priestley on predestination and the laws of causation, and accepts Bartleby as the cross he must bear. He goes very far in tolerance, to the best of his capacities: "Yes, Bartleby, stay there behind your screen, thought I, I shall persecute you no more, you are harmless and noiseless as any of these old chairs, in short, I never feel so private as when I know you are here. ... [M]y mission in this world, Bartleby, is to furnish you with office-room for such period as you may see fit to remain."

But this generous state of mind is disturbed by rumour around him: the explicable feeling of shame proves to be stronger than the inexplicable feeling of guilt which led him to tolerate Bartleby - so he WITHDRAWS, calling the scrivener a "strange creature," an "apparition" and finally an "intolerable incubus." (His shame turns into fear: and what he is the most afraid of is that Bartleby would live long and eventually outlive him, claiming possession of his office. In other words:

³¹ Rom. 13:10.

he is afraid that Bartleby would become him and he would become Bartleby. In one word: right now, he is afraid of death.)

2.7. Now that getting rid of Bartleby is vital, the lawyer APPROACHES the scrivener with a suggestion of "permanent departure." After three days of meditation, he gets Bartleby's answer "that he still prefers to abide with" the lawyer. At this point, the narrator turns to the Kantian "moral question," repeating it three times (What shall I do? ... What shall I do? What ought I to do?), while he tries to draw some strength by "buttoning" his "coat to the last button." He is horrified by any means that would entail violence or cruelty. He wants to find a legal solution, a "just" reason for Bartleby's confinement, but he admits that all his efforts of this kind are in vain. "... - a vagrant, is he? What! he a vagrant, a wanderer, who refuses to budge? It is because he will not be a vagrant, then, that you seek to count him as a vagrant. That is too absurd." And, in the misery of his vacillations, a brilliant idea comes to the lawyer's mind: "Since he will not quit me, I must quit him." Yes, moving away seems to be the healthiest reaction and, for solving problems, this is always a possibility, especially in America. The arrangements take not more than a week and, "in a few hours," the office (into which, up to now, the "universe" of the story has been squeezed), can be successfully evacuated.

But is it really as simple as that? "Throughout, the scrivener remained standing behind the screen, which I directed to be removed the last thing. It was withdrawn, and, being folded up like a huge folio, left him the motionless occupant of a naked room." Bartleby, so divested, does not melt into the non-human background. Now, more exposed than ever, he is a man, the prototype of the human race, in Shakespeare's words, a "bare, forked animal" - "the thing itself."³² The breath of such an existential self-revelation touches the lawyer: his WITHDRAWAL - like the withdrawal of the screen from around Bartleby - is definitely a painful movement. With "(his) hands in (his) pockets and (his) heart in (his) mouth" the lawyer tears himself from Bartleby - and we feel a sense of finitude in this scene: from now on, even the possibility of human relationship is gone.

3. The force with which the lawyer "tears himself from" Bartleby creates a new dimension for circling round the problem. I call it spatial because this time it

³² Lear says this to Edgar in *King Lear*: "thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated man's no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here" (IV.3.104-107). William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir, (London and New York: Methuen and Co., 1972).

is the lawyer who deepens, actually “double spaces” the gap between himself and the scrivener, trying to flee from existential confrontations. In this new dimension, APPROACHES and WITHDRAWALS are almost impossible to be differentiated because they are NEGATIVE, so they can only be characterised by the inability to carry them out. In this final dimensional circle, all the lawyer’s efforts miscarry.

3.1. The NEGATIVE APPROACH of the first circle is the lawyer’s escape, which first seems to be successful. Now he is free to home in on a new “home from home,” to re-establish his snug office-world with his old clerks, trying to forget about the embarrassing Bartleby-episode in his life. But all the time, he suffers from a persecution complex and he is full of “inward tremor” when his successor, the new lawyer at the Wall Street premises, pays him a visit and questions him about Bartleby, stating that he is responsible for the man he left there. “The man you allude to is nothing to me,” says the lawyer, and there is a sense of betrayal in his utterance, deepening his feeling of guilt. (Feeling like a kind of Peter, at this moment, the lawyer surely wouldn’t be surprised if he heard the cock crow.) But the sentence can also be understood as a true confession: Bartleby is nothing to the lawyer; that is, to the lawyer, Bartleby is the personification of nothingness, through whom he has caught a glimpse of the vacuum that exists, first and foremost, in himself. The visitor leaves with the intention to “settle” Bartleby – and the lawyer is left alone with his perturbed feelings. But the scrivener does not cease to haunt him. The owner and the tenants of the Wall Street building are waiting at his door one morning, forming a menacing crowd and demanding an immediate solution to the Bartleby-problem, since the scrivener “now persists in haunting the building generally, sitting upon the banisters of the stairs by day, and sleeping in the entry by night.” This is the point when the question of Bartleby truly becomes a public affair. “Aghast at this torrent” and “fearful of being exposed in the papers,” the lawyer admits his NEGATIVE WITHDRAWAL and agrees upon striving his best “to rid them of the nuisance they complained of.”

3.2. The next circle bears a striking similarity to those of former times when Bartleby was still employed by the lawyer. But there is, to a certain extent, a change of roles: now it is the lawyer who appears on the threshold to meet Bartleby. This time, Bartleby is more talkative than ever and, though his intention to stay there is unchanged, his answers sound quite logical – whereas the lawyer’s questions become more and more absurd. The start of the conversation is

quite comic: when being asked what he is doing, Bartleby answers, "Sitting upon the banister." As in modern absurd dramas, a commonplace question is taken literally, determining the setting of the communicative situation from now on. It is also remarkable that Bartleby is sitting, not standing: his physical posture demonstrates his decline and foreshadows the final image we have of him lying on the ground.

They move into the refurnished familiar chambers, where the lawyer offers him a wide range of occupations he might undertake (they are quite unsuited to Bartleby's character), acting as if he did not know that the scrivener would surely prefer not to take any of them. Bartleby considers and refuses each one of the possibilities. To the offer of a clerkship in the dry-goods store, he says "there is too much confinement about that." He refuses to become a bartender as well, but informs the lawyer about this in a well structured and relatively long sentence. To the third offer, that of a bill-collector's job, he says: "I would prefer to be doing something else." This is the only positive statement we hear from Bartleby in the story – and the lawyer fails to ask WHAT else the scrivener might want to do, thus extinguishing a last, faint sparkle of hope for bridging the gap between them. The lawyer's next offer is the most illogical one we could imagine: "How then, would going as a companion to Europe, to entertain some young gentleman with your conversation – how would that suit you?" Bartleby answers in four complete sentences, and for the third time during the conversation he says: "I am not particular." (Of course, he is not: he is, one might say, general instead. As Dieter Meindl observes, he "can be seen as emblematic of the human condition" – whereas the lawyer's "complex and realistic character is expressive of human nature."³³) The lawyer is bewildered by Bartleby's verbosity and calmness and, "flying into a passion" he stumbles in the logical construction of his sentence when trying to menace the scrivener, as if by magic some fairy in favour of Bartleby had twisted his tongue: "If you do not go away from these premises before night, I shall feel bound – indeed, I am bound – to – to – to quit the premises myself!" Aware of his absurd conclusion, he wants to withdraw, but his NEGATIVE WITHDRAWAL manifests itself in a last desperate attempt to remove Bartleby: he offers to take him home, to his own dwelling. (This is the only mention of a private home and the lawyer's offer is more than generous here – although it is partly guided by fear of the group of impatient people waiting outside for his solution.) The scrivener prefers not to share a home with the

³³ Meindl pp. 101-2.

lawyer, thus implying that he does not regard the lawyer's house to be a true home – and this implication strikes the narrator as a home truth.

3.3 As if stung by a bee, the lawyer, “effectually dodging every one by the suddenness and rapidity of his flight,” rushes from the building, runs up Wall Street towards Broadway and “jumping into the first omnibus is soon removed from pursuit.” In this frenzy of a flight, the most NEGATIVE APPROACH possible is manifested. He tries to calm down by considering that he has done all that could be done for Bartleby, but his persecution complex almost reaches paranoia: he dare not go home or to his office but, for a few days, lives like a fugitive in his “rockaway.”

But upon going home, he is deeply touched by a note informing him that Bartleby has been taken to prison, and the rest of the story up to the “sequel,” from now on, can be characterised by a NEGATIVE WITHDRAWAL, i.e. an impossibility of withdrawal from watching, witnessing, testifying to the scrivener's inevitable decay. What the lawyer formerly thought of as “too absurd,” has now come true: Bartleby is imprisoned “as a vagrant.” What Michel Foucault says about the confinement of madmen, might be relevant here:

Confinement is the practice which corresponds most exactly to madness experienced as unreason, that is, as the empty negativity of reason, by confinement, madness is acknowledged to be nothing. That is, on the one hand, madness is immediately perceived as difference: whence the forms of spontaneous and collective judgement sought, not from physicians, but from men of good sense, to determine the confinement of a madman, and on the other hand, confinement cannot have any other goal than a correction (that is, the suppression of the difference, of the fulfilment of this nothingness in death), whence those options for death are so often to be found in the registers of confinement, written by the attendants, and which are not the sign of the confinement's savagery, its inhumanity or perversion, but the strict expression of its meaning: an operation to annihilate nothingness.³⁴

The “Tombs” – what an ominous name for a jail! – George Foster describes it as a “grim mausoleum of hope,” and as a “foul lazar-house of polluted and festering humanity.”³⁵ The narrator describes how (as he later learns) Bartleby was conducted to his final destination, “offering not the slightest obstacle,” how

³⁴ Foucault pp. 115-6.

³⁵ Quoted by Reynolds p. 295.

“the silent procession filed its way through all the noise, and heat, and joy of the roaring thoroughfares at noon.” The lawyer can be indignant about the procedure professionally as well, since sending an innocent man to prison is a clear “miscarriage of justice.” The same day he visits the Tombs, not only because he is required to make an official statement, but because he desperately wants to have an interview with Bartleby, again guided by the guilty feeling of the parent or teacher who has neglected his educational responsibility. “In the quietest of the yards,” he finds the scrivener and senses a kind of threat to Bartleby’s “pallidly neat, pitiably respectable” innocence: “all round, from the narrow slits of the jail windows, I thought I saw peering out upon him the eyes of murderers and thieves.” In their last, brief conversation the messages are hopelessly miscarried: “I know you ... and I want to say nothing to you,” says Bartleby, and the lawyer reads an implied suspicion from his words, so he starts making an apology and excusing himself: “It was not I that brought you here.” (Bartleby’s sentence could also be understood as a futile attempt at saying nothing, i.e. revealing the nothing to his former employer.) The lawyer tries to console him by calling his attention to the sky and the grass, and to the fact that the prison “is not so vile a place” – to which a dry “I know where I am” is the scrivener’s reply. So the lawyer leaves him.

The episode with the healthy, jovial “grub-man” serves to release the tension of the dialogue above, since the turnkey is a figure typical of anecdotes. But at present, being a bit out of humour, the lawyer is more irritated than amused by the talkative “broad meat-like man.” He gives him some money to provide his “friend” with more substantial meals – but Bartleby “prefers not to dine.” The grub-man is quite disappointed to hear that Bartleby, instead of being a “gentleman forger,” is “a little deranged”; nevertheless, he would gladly start a conversation about forgers with the lawyer – but the latter “cannot stop longer.”

The lawyer’s next visit to the Tombs is the final one – and the prison yard where Bartleby’s secret is sealed, is described like the sanctuary of a mysterious temple: “The yard was entirely quiet. It was not accessible to the common prisoners. The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seems, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung.” Then the lawyer catches sight of the “wasted” Bartleby, “strangely huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up, and lying

on his side, his head touching the cold stones," in the typical position of a fetus—a not-yet actualised possibility of a human being. The lawyer feels his hand and shivers – and to the round-faced grub-man's profane questions ("... does he live without dining?" "Eh! – He's asleep, ain't he?") he answers, closing Bartleby's eyes, with the dignity of a priest. What seemed so impossible and still so evident, what had secretly been his ardent wish has come true: Bartleby has preferred to cease to exist. He "lives without dining" and sleeps "with kings and counsellors." The lawyer finds the Word for his funeral sermon in the Book of Job:

Why died I not from the womb? why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly? Why did the knees prevent me? or why the breasts that I should suck? For now should I have lain still and been quiet, I should have slept: then had I been at rest, With kings and counsellors of the earth, which built desolate places for themselves, Or with princes that had gold, who filled their houses with silver: Or as an hidden untimely birth I had not been, as infants which never saw light.³⁶

Yes, Bartleby's plight is in a way similar to the brief life of an unborn child: in both cases the question of what can be regarded as a human being is painfully left open.

But the time-dimension provides the confronting nature of the question with distance: in the "sequel," the lawyer's anecdotic and self-important style returns. He gives us the information which up to now he has managed to hold back: that Bartleby had formerly been working at the Dead Letter Office – where letters that have not reached their destination "are annually burned" "by the cartload." The lawyer's slightly melodramatic recital of the possible messages these miscarried letters might have contained is followed by the two exclamations: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" – and this is the end of the story (or anti-story).

Of course, we are dissatisfied. Frank Kermode comments: "There is, one might say, a tendency on the part of writers and readers to wish upon endings the status of ends: mere cessation is not satisfying – one hankers after entelechy, some sense that a potential has been actualised, that the ending has conferred order and consonance on the beginning and the middle. To express the matter as simply as possible, this completion is also what we should want in our own lives and deaths, however skeptical we may be about the possibility of achieving it." ... "By such

³⁶ Job 3:11-16.

means we ‘humanise the common death.’”³⁷ But does the text of *Bartleby* offer such a humanisation?

What happens to *Bartleby* and the lawyer can by no means be called a tragedy, and there is no moral to be learned. What we are confronted with is a “pure event” – like a sudden miscarriage – without comprehensible precedents and practically without consequences. A pure event is indeed something which we would prefer not to place anywhere in our lives – our “common sense bids the soul be rid of it.” But in the course of close-reading, this is not a possibility. The reader – unlike *Bartleby* – is not free to state preferences. Trying to place a pure event in one’s life is by no means a comfortable withdrawal from taking it into account but a necessity, in order to be identical with ourselves, in order to be identical with the self that had to live it through. Even pure events have to be in some sense workable since, within a lifetime, they at least succeed each other and gain a place in the linearity of our history.

Our “sphere” of interpretative circles is constructed – but does it serve as an “atmosphere”? Can we now breathe in the proximity of the void? I think breathing is possible, but the “void” has escaped from the middle of the sphere. It seems that, unlike the Magdeburg hemispheres, the sphere of interpretation is not held together by the vacuum but by something else. The void now exists outside, in a kind of linear tangent, represented by the linear, two-directional movement of *Bartleby*, aiming both at life and at death. But then, what have we got in the sphere? A passage from Melville perhaps answers the question since, in the chapter “The Doubloon” from *Moby Dick*, a similar sphere of interpretation is constructed by captain Ahab, who, in examining the emblems on a gold coin nailed to the mast (three mountains, one bearing a flame, one a tower and one a crowing cock), says:

The firm tower, that is Ahab, the volcano, that is Ahab, the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too is Ahab, all are Ahab, and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn mirrors back his own mysterious self.³⁸

³⁷ Frank Kermode, ‘Endings, continued’ in Budick and Iser, *Languages of the Unsayable* p. 81.

³⁸ John T. Irwin quotes this passage in his *American Hieroglyphics. The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983) p. 287.

Now, that my own APPROACH and WITHDRAWAL has come full circle, I would, in the home-stretch of this paper, not like to “stretch the truth.” It is, of course, highly debatable, to say the least, whether “circular paths to nowhere” can ever lead anybody home. After having read ‘Bartleby the Scrivener,’ we have to accept ambiguities as ambiguities. Indeed, it is very tempting to leave the whole enterprise at that. But in our ambiguous world, there would be too much conformity in such a conclusion. Ambiguity, in fact, can only remain ambiguity if it is not accepted, if the possibility of finding ourselves suddenly at home is not totally rejected. We can never aim at less than a final “nevertheless.”