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THE LOST WORLD OF BARTLEBY,
THE EX-OFFICEHOLDER:
VARIATIONS ON A VENERABLE LITERARY FORM

RICHARD R. JOHN

FOR over a generation, literary critics and cultural historians have pondered the enigmatic relationship between Bartleby, the proud yet emotionally troubled copyist in Herman Melville's haunting short story "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853), and his employer, a genial yet uncomprehending Wall Street lawyer who did a "snug business" in the mortgages, bonds, and legal titles of the well-to-do.¹ Much of the mystery surrounding this relationship stems from the paucity of information that the lawyer, the tale's narrator, provides us about Bartleby's life prior to his employment in the law office. It is an "irreparable loss to literature," the lawyer openly laments, that no materials exist for a "full and satisfactory biography" of his unfortunate assistant (p. 13). All that can be known, or so he assures us, is what he saw through his own astonished eyes—with, that is, the solitary exception of "one vague report" (p. 13). By the end of the tale, however, we find ourselves doubting the lawyer's sincerity. Indeed, at times he seems deliberately obscure and even misleading about many features of the copyist's life. The lawyer's inability, or refusal, to understand Bartleby's predicament is an integral feature of Melville's literary design, and our recognition of Melville's artistry in encouraging the reader to question the lawyer's reliability can heighten our appreciation of the tale. One aspect of that artistry that may be less accessible to us today than it was to Melville's contemporaries concerns the "one vague report" the lawyer dutifully relates at the story's close.



Prior to Bartleby's employment with him, the lawyer explains, the copyist had worked as a clerk in the dead letter bureau of the general

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¹Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street," *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1987), p. 14.

post office in Washington, D.C., and had been dismissed from that position following a "change in the administration" (p. 45). The lawyer finds this "one little item of rumor" highly suggestive and ruminates on its possible moral significance for a young man of Bartleby's temperament: "Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? . . . On errands of life, these letters speed to death. Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" (p. 45).

Most twentieth-century readers have discounted this biographical detail as extraneous to Melville's literary design.² It would be a mistake, one leading critic declares, to attach "anything like the significance" that the lawyer does to the rumor of Bartleby's former occupation.³ Interestingly, the critic reaches this conclusion even though he freely concedes that Melville's readers could have been expected to be broadly familiar with the dead letter office, a well-known nineteenth-century institution that was often the subject of fictional and journalistic accounts.⁴

To appreciate fully how Melville expected his strange ending to function within the context of the story, it would seem appropriate to try to reconstruct how nineteenth-century readers were likely to have interpreted the lawyer's disclosure. In Melville's day, surprise endings that jostled readers' expectations were a common feature of the short story. Similar devices had been frequently employed by the leading masters of the genre, including Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe,

²See Dan McCall, *The Silence of Bartleby* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), a recent appraisal of the voluminous commentary on the tale. McCall writes: "But nobody seems to take seriously the Dead Letter Office as an explanation for what went wrong with Bartleby; most critics tell us that the rumor is a boomerang, and it flies right back to the Lawyer, showing us what is wrong with him" (p. 129). For a particularly pointed critique of Melville's ending, see Charles G. Hoffman, "The Shorter Fiction of Herman Melville," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 52 (July 1953): 414-30. "The final long paragraph," Hoffman writes, "is the flaw that mars the perfection of the whole. Melville did not let well enough alone. The ending is anticlimactic. . . . it attempts to add biographical information about Bartleby after enough has been said. Worse still, the artistic purpose of the ending, a metaphorical summing up of Bartleby's life, falls flat" (pp. 420-21).

³Hershel Parker, "Dead Letters and Melville's Bartleby," *Resources for American Literary Study* 4 (Spring 1974): 91.

⁴Hershel Parker, "The 'Sequel' in Bartleby," in *Bartleby the Inscrutable: A Collection of Commentary on Herman Melville's Tale "Bartleby the Scrivener,"* ed. M. Thomas Inge (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1979), p. 160.

and Nathaniel Hawthorne. It would, then, be anachronistic to treat the lawyer's revelation as a clumsy afterthought that Melville tacked on at the end of his story. It is also inaccurate. At the opening of the tale, the lawyer alludes to Bartleby's former dismissal directly, instilling in his readership the expectation that he would tie up this loose end at some later point.

How, then, might nineteenth-century readers have interpreted this unexpected revelation? Had they been at all familiar with nineteenth-century public life, they might well have found in Bartleby's plight a parable of downward mobility. During his stint as a government clerk, Bartleby had almost certainly commanded a salary of at least \$1,000 a year. This was a considerable sum in an age in which a journeyman could expect to bring in a mere \$300, and a man required an annual income of no less than \$500 to raise his family comfortably. In expensive localities like New York City, where "Bartleby" is set, that minimum for comfort could easily exceed \$600.⁵ Yet it would have been rare, if not unknown, for even the most enterprising law office copyist to make half this sum. At the time of Bartleby's dismissal, the lawyer owed him a mere \$12 in back pay (p. 33). Compounding Bartleby's financial woes is the fact that, as a copyist, he is no longer salaried—as he had been as a government clerk—but, rather, is paid by the piece at the "usual rate of four cents a folio (one hundred words)" (p. 25).

The lawyer's revelation about Bartleby's past also provided readers with insight into his social status. Clerkships in the dead letter office were almost never bestowed upon socially or politically marginal men. Ordinarily, these positions were reserved for elderly ministers in need of financial assistance or for well-connected yet impecunious young merchants who had failed in business. The office was, in short, a favorite dumping ground for that nineteenth-century stock figure: the gentleman *manqué*.⁶

Bartleby's mastery of calligraphy provides further evidence of his privileged social background. Fast and accurate penmanship was not necessarily a badge of high status; Nippers and Turkey, after all, had acquired the art. Yet Bartleby's mastery of the copyist's craft did

⁵See Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989), p. 59.

⁶For a more extended discussion of officeholding and patronage, see my *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), chaps. 3, 4, 6. On the workings of the dead letter office, see Francis Copcutt, "A Day in the Dead-Letter Office," *Knickerbocker*, February 1860, p. 183.

strongly suggest that he had enjoyed the benefit of a solid education. With its arcane conventions and exacting technical demands, the skill could not be easily faked. Therefore the lawyer, who takes pains to assure himself that Bartleby possesses the requisite technical ability before he is hired (p. 19), knows a good deal more about Bartleby's background from the start than his disclaimers might lead one to surmise.

These financial and social considerations help unravel some of the enigmatic features of Bartleby's stint as a clerk. The ferocious energy with which he copies documents when he first joins the office, for example, can be seen as an understandable yet fundamentally futile attempt to match the income he had formerly enjoyed as a government employee. Paid by the piece, Bartleby naively hopes that hard work will bring with it a commensurate material reward. To minimize the cost of room and board, he eats little and bunks down on the lawyer's couch. Even Bartleby's bizarre refusal to vacate the office following his dismissal becomes somewhat more explicable. Having been removed once, he is determined, as it were, not to be removed again.

A similar calculus renders less startling Bartleby's polite but firm refusal to perform routine tasks, like checking copy and running errands. No longer salaried, he is understandably reluctant to undertake even customary chores for which he will not be paid. Yet even had Bartleby's eyesight not given out, he would never have come close to matching his former income in his present position. That much is clear when the lawyer rummages through Bartleby's desk and discovers a bandanna containing the pitifully small sums he has managed to save.

Bartleby's former occupation also provides a context for his celebrated retort to his employer's repeated request that he perform one task or another. When Bartleby responds, "I prefer not to," he adopts the sardonic, self-pitying tone of a social superior who is well aware that he has fallen on hard times. He sulks—as the lawyer aptly describes him in a rare, if unintended, flash of insight—with a hauteur that is reminiscent of the deposed Roman general Marius, who brooded about the injustice of his forced exile amidst the ruins of Carthage, a city whose plight he compared to his own (p. 28). Indeed, the word *prefer* itself evokes rich associations with the culture of public office from which Bartleby had been evicted. *Preferment* referred to holding public office and *preferring charges* to drafting a formal indictment against a public officer who failed to uphold his trust.

Especially perceptive nineteenth-century readers may even have

detected a parallel between Bartleby's dismissal from the dead letter office and the lawyer's loss of a valuable post as justice of the chancery court in the state of New York. Indeed, the lawyer's initial appointment as a master of chancery generated the additional paperwork that obliged him to hire Bartleby in the first place (p. 19). It is interesting, too, that the lawyer regards the loss of his government office as a major blow. "I must be permitted to be rash here"—he declares, in a highly atypical outburst of temper—"and declare that I consider the sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Master in Chancery . . . as a ——— premature act, inasmuch as I had counted upon a life-lease of the profits, whereas I only received those of a few short years" (p. 14). The combination of the lawyer's personal outrage and his failure to link his copyist's strange and puzzling behavior with his prior loss of a government clerkship almost certainly would have raised questions for discerning contemporary readers about the lawyer's unreliability as a teller of Bartleby's tale.

If the lawyer, like Bartleby, had lost a lucrative government office, then why did he not draw attention to this feature of Bartleby's past in explaining Bartleby's behavior? How could the lawyer have been so obtuse? Much of the answer can be found in the lawyer's highly circumscribed social vision. In the early republic, it was customary for well-to-do professional men like the lawyer to play an active role in public affairs. Indeed, this presumption was a principal tenet of the political ethos the lawyer celebrated when he displayed a bust of Cicero in his law office, the celebrated Roman lawyer-statesman whose legendary civic-mindedness was for nineteenth-century Americans a constant source of inspiration and rebuke. Even casual nineteenth-century readers could not have failed to note that the lawyer conspicuously fails to live up to the Ciceronian ideal. Content to work quietly, behind the scenes, he never addresses a jury or harangues a crowd (p. 14). For him, the lost judgeship was simply a sinecure, not an opportunity to discharge a civic obligation.

Indeed, the lawyer is so preoccupied with purely personal concerns—in particular, his inability to get rid of Bartleby—that he completely forgets that it is election day. When, for example, he overhears a crowd betting on the outcome of the vote, he assumes—in one of the tale's most richly comic moments—that the gamblers are referring *not* to the mayoral election but to the moral drama that is being enacted in the privacy of his office. "In my intent frame of mind," he explains, "I had, as it were, imagined that all Broadway shared in my excitement, and were debating the same question with me" (p. 34).

Clearly the lawyer's social vision has been severely constrained by his preoccupation with his private affairs.

The lawyer's failure to reflect imaginatively on the wider implications of Bartleby's dismissal, then, is perfectly in character. Even though a lawyer and at one time a judge, he demonstrates no awareness of the myriad ways in which political party activity was reshaping the political process. By the early 1840s, the period in which Melville sets his tale, the partisan dismissal of public officeholders had become widely recognized as one of the most serious evils in American public life.⁷ Since the lawyer is almost certainly a Whig—the party in power during the years in which the story takes place—his obliviousness to Bartleby's predicament speaks volumes about his political naiveté.⁸

Bartleby's dismissal would have been widely viewed as scandalous, for it took place in one of the few branches of the central government which even the most energetic party leaders assumed to be outside the rapidly expanding vortex of party politics. Unlike postmasters, custom house surveyors, and most other subordinate public officers, dead letter clerks could ordinarily retain their offices for life.⁹ They enjoyed this unusual distinction because they were the *only* public officers entrusted with the legal authority to open mail that had gone astray. Since merchants routinely relied on the postal system to transmit, uninsured, fully negotiable banknotes, some worth as much as \$10,000, the work of the dead letter clerk, as one commentator put it, was of a "most delicate and confidential character."¹⁰ By recovering lost valuables, another journalist wrote, dead letter clerks performed an "immense good" and revived "many stifled hopes."¹¹ But only pecuniary hopes. In this period, only those lost letters containing money, rings, deeds, or other valuables were returned to senders. All other letters were immediately set aside as worthless and, four times a year,

⁷See Charles Swann, "Dating the Action of 'Bartleby,'" *Notes and Queries* 32 (September 1985): 357–59.

⁸For another variant on the lawyer-as-Whig theme, see John Seelye, "The Contemporary 'Bartleby,'" *American Transcendental Quarterly* 7 (Summer 1970): 13.

⁹Though the partisan dismissal of dead letter clerks was by no means unknown, it is an exaggeration to contend, as Reed Sanderlin does, that it was "not uncommon." See his "A Re-Examination of the Role of the Lawyer-Narrator in Melville's 'Bartleby,'" *Interpretations: Studies in Language and Literature* 10 (1978): 54. Had dismissals been frequent, dead letter clerks would hardly have been portrayed, as they so often were, as *old* men who retained office through many administrations.

¹⁰"The Dead-Letter Office," *Knickerbocker*, August 1861, p. 180.

¹¹*Albany Daily State Register*, 23 September 1852, in Parker, "Dead Letters," p. 99.

were unceremoniously burned in a huge bonfire that lit up the Washington sky.

Since dead letter clerks were ordinarily exempt from the vagaries of party politics, it is worth considering what possible significance Melville's more perceptive readers might have assigned to *Bartleby's* dismissal. Certainly if partisan politics were seen as brazenly ransacking the ranks of the dead letter office, then the sanctity of private property and the rule of law was in utmost peril. Party leaders bent on distributing these positions to political supporters therefore had a powerful incentive to cover their tracks and insinuate that the ex-officeholder had somehow failed to uphold his trust. Such purposeful character assassination was a common strategy in the period, as we know from the number of apologias issued by ex-officeholders determined to restore their reputations. Yet *Bartleby* remained silent. Little wonder, then, that he found himself reduced to scouring the want ads.



Of course not even all nineteenth-century readers of "Bartleby the Scrivener," let alone twentieth-century critics, have recognized the full significance for the tale's odd protagonist of his prior dismissal from the dead letter office. Still, given the circumstances of the tale's publication, that plot element strongly recommends itself to our attention. "Bartleby" was Melville's first magazine piece, a literary form that was often shaped by contemporary events. It was almost certainly written in response to a formal request from George P. Putnam, the founder of *Putnam's Monthly*, a popular magazine that aspired—as Putnam declared in the opening issue—to be a "running commentary upon the countless phenomena of the times as they rise." It was, Putnam added, a "point of the utmost importance" for his authors to be faithful to the "local reality" of the day.¹²

That the dead letter office was part of Melville's "local reality" there can be no doubt. The institution has become a "great curiosity," noted one journalist as early as 1841.¹³ By the time Melville wrote his tale, it had emerged as one of the leading tourist attractions in the capital. During the presidential inauguration of Zachary Taylor in 1849, the

¹²[George P. Putnam], "Introductory," *Putnam's Monthly*, January 1853, p. 2.

¹³"Dead Letter Office," *New World*, 3 July 1841, p. 15.

office was visited by as many as one hundred people a day.¹⁴ Ever since he had been a child, confessed one magazinist, he had held a “vivid picture” of it in his mind; now he wanted to test the accuracy of his imagination by viewing the office in person.¹⁵ “A ‘dead letter’ containing \$2,500,” announced one typical newspaper squib, “was discovered in the dead letter office at Washington last week.”¹⁶ An optimist was said to declare, reported a contemporary memoir, “I b’lieve I’ll scooter down to Washin’ton, says I, and take a peep into the Dead Letter office, and see if I can find hide or hair o’ that ’ere hundred dollar letter, says I.”¹⁷ One Pennsylvania woman went so far as to write the postmaster general to ask if she might be permitted to sort through the dead letters herself in order to raise the necessary funds to travel to England and claim an inheritance.¹⁸

The dead letter office was, in short, a shrine to commerce, a safety net for merchants who relied on the central government to facilitate business on a continental scale. It is, thus, highly fitting that Melville closed his “story of Wall-Street”—set as it is at the epicenter of the country’s leading financial emporium—with an allusion to the workings of that notable bureaucratic institution. Like the chancery court over which the lawyer had briefly presided, the dead letter office, also, was a guardian of the property rights of the well-to-do.¹⁹

There are a few tantalizing clues that contemporary readers approached “Bartleby” with some of these associations in mind. At least one early twentieth-century commentator assumed that Bartleby’s peculiarities could be explained by the circumstances surrounding his prior dismissal from office. Bartleby, the critic declared, in an unconvincing gloss, was a government clerk who had lost a lucrative position, a misfortune that was the “queer clue” to his “luckless life.”²⁰ Even more suggestive was the intriguing claim by an early reviewer that Bartleby was a “silent old clerk” whose “extraordinary silence”

¹⁴*Albany Daily State Register*, 23 September 1852, reprinted by Parker, in “Dead Letters,” p. 98.

¹⁵Copcutt, “Dead-Letter Office,” p. 181.

¹⁶*Pennsylvania Freeman*, 10 March 1853, p. 39.

¹⁷James Holbrook, *Ten Years among the Mail Bags* (Philadelphia: H. Cowperthwait & Co., 1855), p. 313.

¹⁸R[ebecca] H. Joyce to Aaron Brown, 31 May 1857, vertical file, U.S. Postal Service Library, Washington, D.C.

¹⁹Herbert F. Smith, “Melville’s Master in Chancery and His Recalcitrant Clerk,” *American Quarterly* 17 (Winter 1965): 736.

²⁰John Freeman, *Herman Melville* (London: Macmillan, 1926), p. 145.

could be explained by the fact that "he had spent nearly all his former life in the Dead Letter Office at Washington."²¹ The error—Bartleby is a young man—is itself revealing, for it indicates that the reviewer wrote out of his imagination, where the picture of an elderly dead letter clerk had lodged itself. Here, then, is suggestive evidence of the power of a long-forgotten cultural assumption to shape the meaning of a literary text.

Melville himself had ample reason to share his readers' interest in the partisan dismissal of public officeholders. His brother Gansevoort was a successful Democratic politician who well understood the intimate relationship between the judicious distribution of patronage and the effectiveness of a political party's appeal to the masses. Melville's uncle, Thomas Melvill, was a hero of the Boston Tea Party who in 1829 had been summarily dismissed as inspector of the port of Boston by Andrew Jackson. Thomas Melvill's removal, one contemporary observed, had more "deeply shocked the moral sense of the community" than any of the myriad other changes that the Jacksonians introduced.²²

Circumstances even closer to home may also have stirred Melville's imagination. Melville's good friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, who had briefly served a Democratic administration as surveyor of the Salem Custom House during the 1840s, had suffered an identical fate. Although plainly troubled by the event, Hawthorne had ingeniously depoliticized it in the celebrated "Custom House" preface to *The Scarlet Letter* by adopting a carefully cultivated pose of genteel refinement. As Hawthorne anticipated, the sketch met a popular demand, and he regarded it as the source of the book's popularity.²³ Finally, and not least important, at precisely the time Melville was composing "Bartleby," his relatives were trying to secure him a patronage job in the incoming administration—which, of course, would have rendered him vulnerable to Bartleby's fate.²⁴

Less personal yet no less pressing concerns may also have encouraged Melville to view the topic as one ripe for fictional treatment.

²¹*Boston Daily Evening Traveller*, 3 June 1856, reprinted by Inge, in *Bartleby the Inscrutable*, p. 39.

²²Cited in Stanley Edgar Hyman, "Melville the Scrivener," *New Mexico Quarterly* 23 (Winter 1953): 384.

²³Stephen Nissenbaum, "The Firing of Nathaniel Hawthorne," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 114 (April 1978): 57–71.

²⁴Leon Howard, *Herman Melville: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), pp. 203–6.

Civil service reform, after all, had already emerged by the 1850s as one of the most vexing public issues of the day, and few contemporaries found the evils of political spoilsmanship more deplorable than George W. Curtis, the editor of the magazine for which Melville was writing. "An almost universal sweeping out of subordinates," Curtis declared in the summer of 1853, "is peculiar to the late history of this nation, and is as disgraceful to the parties who are the instruments of it, as it is dangerous to morals and political virtue."²⁵ Such a partisan purge, Curtis added, was "mean, bigoted, malignant and cruel . . . and only fit for the adoption of those Eastern despots who delight to surround themselves with fawning satraps, and trembling slaves." Particularly pernicious were its consequences for the ex-officeholder: "Every day in politics, men are made penniless for daring to express their sentiments as freemen, by the successful parties to which they may be opposed!"²⁶ From almost any standpoint, the practice was despicable: "Does it not attack political virtue at its source; corrupt the integrity of the electoral body . . . convert popular suffrage into a farce . . . bring a scandal upon government, and thereby weaken, if it does not wholly destroy, the sanctity of law."²⁷

There is, in short, good reason to read "Bartleby" as a fictional variant of the defense pamphlet, an avalanche of which were tumbling from the pens of ex-officeholders and their friends.²⁸ Like much great literature, the story reworked and played off of a hackneyed literary form. Hawthorne's "Custom House" preface began the restructuring process by assiduously excising any hint of partisan bile. "Bartleby" was more innovative still. While Hawthorne remained the *subject* of his apologia, Melville translated his ex-officeholders' lament into the voice of an uncomprehending narrator who is entirely oblivious to the wider dimensions of Bartleby's plight. In a celebrated essay on Hawthorne, Melville praised his friend's solicitude for the "eagle-eyed reader" and his willingness to "egregiously deceive" the "superficial skimmer of pages."²⁹ By closing "Bartleby" with a tantalizing, yet eas-

²⁵[George W. Curtis], "Our New President," *Putnam's*, September 1853, p. 305.

²⁶"Our New President," p. 305.

²⁷"Our New President," pp. 304-5.

²⁸The phrase "defense pamphlet" is Joanne B. Freeman's. See, esp., her "Slander, Poison, Whispers, and Fame: Jefferson's 'Anas' and Political Gossip in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (Spring 1995): 52.

²⁹Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850), in Hayford, *Piazza Tales*, p. 251.

ily misunderstood, hint about *Bartleby's* past, Melville perpetuated his own ingenious literary deception. So much ink had been spilled about the injustice of patronage politics that it was time for silence. So many self-interested pronouncements had been made public that it was time for privacy. By filtering the tale of *Bartleby's* life through the medium of an unsympathetic, unreliable narrator, Melville reinvigorated the ousted officeholder's apologia. Stripped of its central element, the defense of character, Melville's variation on this venerable literary form spoke with a poignant, understated eloquence of the devastation one particular species of social injustice could wreak on a vulnerable and ultimately defenseless individual.

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