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Like so much of the work of Franz Kafka, Herman Melville's "Bartleby" nearly defies coherent criticism. Working on a level that is both abstract and allegorical, Melville forged "Bartleby" out of a tremendous number of ideas, leaving the reader with a story that can be read in a great variety of ways, many of these readings contradictory and dissonant. Laced throughout "Bartleby" are plotlines having to do with Northern Slavery, supposed self-discovery (by the lawyer - which is ridiculous), a parable of the absurd, a story of unrelenting pessimism, an experiment in narration, and a lesson in why timidity is poor business practice. Perhaps the most ambiguous thread in "Bartleby" is the strange dialectic occurring between determinism and free will. At best, Melville hints at the possibility of this philosophical reading; however, the text is loaded with commentary on the subject. One could even claim that "Bartleby" is a parable of Schopenhauerian asceticism and an anticipation of Sisyphus, Camus' absurd hero. This paper will be an examination of this tension between determinism and free will with the ultimate purpose of attempting to locate a synthesis to this seemingly uncompromising dialectic.

It is an understatement to say that Bartleby is a rather eccentric character. From the first description we get of him it is clear that he is an anomaly. "In answer to my advertisement, a motionless young man one morning stood upon my office threshold, the door being open, for it was summer. I can see that figure now - pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby" (Melville 9). Talk about a bizarre way to describe a person! The adjectives - neat, respectable, and forlorn - are not out of the ordinary, but the syntactically odd adverbs are quite strange for a first impression: pallidly, pitiably, incurably. Already we are given the impression that Bartleby has some type of illness - something that begs the question of how the narrator came to this conclusion on first sight (and further begs the question of the narrator's authenticity, which will be examined later).

Immediately Bartleby is distinguished from the other employees by having his desk situated on the attorney's side of the division in the office. His desk was placed there "so as to have this quiet man within easy call, in case any trifling thing was to be done" (9). Initially, Bartleby was an exemplary employee who was "cheerfully industrious" (9). Before long the lawyer gets the first indications that even if there were "trifling things" to be done, Bartleby would not be the one doing them. We are introduced to Bartleby's favorite word: *prefer*. Asked to proofread some copying he had done, Bartleby calmly replies that he "would prefer not to." The choice of verb is deliberate (as soon becomes evident by the repeated use) - prefer. Not once does Bartleby say he "will" not; he completely avoids the use of the verb "to be." This linguistic clue as to what's going on inside Bartleby is one of the few clues we have into his actual mental state. In the entirety of the story, Bartleby makes only one active action - he shows up and applies for the open position. From this point we find Bartleby quickly retreating from this position into himself. Bartleby's only actions (after this first one) are all *reactions* - he never once begins conversation, he never once asserts his will. When he states he would "prefer" not to do something he is not *willing* something to happen, but the opposite: *not willing* something to happen. Even the (somewhat blind) narrator sees this. "Poor fellow! thought I, he means no mischief; it is plain he intends no insolence; his aspect sufficiently evinces that his eccentricities are *involuntary*" (13, italics mine).

With every step away from expected, "normal" behavior Bartleby retreats into himself in a sort of ascetic flight from the world. Each time he draws nearer himself he becomes more maddening for the lawyer and the other employees. We find concentric circles of walls: Wall Street, the walls that surround the building, the walls of the building (and the windows), the division between the lawyer's side and the employee's side of the office, and the barrier between Bartleby's desk and the lawyer. Bartleby is simply erecting even more walls - first between himself and the others, and then between himself and the physical world, and then, finally, within himself. These increasingly tight barriers show Bartleby whittling away at the temptations of life, ridding himself of everything but his essential *self*.

In *The World as Will and Representation*, Arthur Schopenhauer puts forth a conception of human metaphysical reality that is eerily similar to the journey that Bartleby undertakes. Melville probably would have liked Schopenhauer - they're both dark and pessimistic. In order to understand how Schopenhauer reaches his endorsement of asceticism I must first preface with a whirlwind overview of his philosophy. For Schopenhauer, there is one *thing-in-itself* (the inner content, the essence of the world): the will to life. The will to life is in a state of freedom. Individual beings that are alive are termed phenomena. "As the will is the thing-in-itself, the inner content, the essence of the world, but life, the visible world, the phenomenon, is only the mirror of the will, this world will accompany the will as inseparably as a body is accompanied by its shadow; and if will exists, then life, the world, will exist" (Schopenhauer 275). The most important thing to understand at this point is that the will to life necessitates and determines the actions of the phenomenon; while the thing-in-itself, the will to life, is freedom, the actual phenomenal world is determined. A wolf kills prey and eats due to the will to life; a flower grows towards sunlight due to the will to life, etc.

Man, like a wolf or a flower or bacteria, is a phenomenon. However, unlike these phenomena, man has the ability to reflect upon himself and is in the unique position of recognizing the thing-in-itself in himself.

> Like every other part of nature, man is objectivity of the will; therefore all that we have said holds good of him also. Just as everything in nature has its forces and qualities that definitely react to a definite impression, and constitute its character, so man has his *character*, from which the motives call forth his actions with necessity. In this way of acting his empirical character reveals itself, but in this again is revealed his intelligible character, i.e., the will in it self, of which he is the determined phenomenon (2 8 7) .

Given this metaphysical structure it would seem logically impossible for human beings to be awarded free will: all will is determined by the will to life. There is one loop-hole, though: since man is the only phenomenon that is aware of his condition, he is aware that he is determined. This being the case, Schopenhauer argues, there is one path to free action available: the renunciation of the will to life. Schopenhauer qualifies this by stating that "Far from being the denial of the will [to life], suicide is the phenomenon of the will's strong affirmation. For denial has its essential nature in the fact that the pleasures of life, not its sorrows, are shunned. The suicide wills life, and is dissatisfied merely with the conditions on which it has come to him" (398). However, through a sort of ascetic life one is able to act freely and deny the will to life.

> Thus the freedom which in other respects, as be longing to the thing-in-itself, can never show itself in the phenomenon, in such a case appears in this phenomenon; and by abolishing the essential nature at the root of the phenomenon, whilst the phenomenon itself still continues to exist in time, it brings about a contradiction of the phenomenon with itself. In just this way, it exhibits the phenomena of holiness and self-denial (288).

One of the reasons, I suspect, that this philosophical dilemma is overlooked in "Bartleby" must be due to the change in writing style and mood. Gone are the long, high-flying philosophical diatribes of *Moby-Dick* and Melville's earlier fiction. Instead, we find in "Bartleby" a very subtle and exceptionally constructed example of a philosophical idea being *acted out* rather than discussed. Bartleby is a fictional exemplification of Schopenhauer's asceticism - compare the discussion of Bartleby above to the thrust of Schopenhauer's argument: Bartleby's "preferring not" is a nearly perfect embodiment of the asceticism that goes hand in hand with the rejection of the will to life. On the other end of the dialectic lies the lawyer who busies himself reading Joseph Priestly and Jonathan Edwards on necessity and the will. The lawyer declares: "At last I have seen it, I feel it; I penetrate to the predestinated purpose of my life. I am content. Others may have loftier parts to enact, but my mission in this world, Bartleby, is to furnish you with office room for such period as you may see fit to remain" (Melville 26). Unknown to the lawyer (and there is much told us of which the lawyer is ignorant), he absolutely *is* determined according to Schopenhauer's philosophy.

When the lawyer visits Bartleby in the Tombs Bartleby says something rather curious: "I know you" (31). A few lines later, "I know where I am" (32). In fact, Bartleby is the one person in the entire story qualified to say he knows anything - he has become aware of his state and engaged in the ascetic path to freedom; everybody else is to different degrees (d)eluding themselves. Bartleby is able to look around and see these phenomena surrounding him for what they are, something they are not able to do themselves. The greatest of these liars is the lawyer himself. At one point the lawyer asks Bartleby why he refuses to write; Bartleby replies, "Do you not see the reason for yourself" (21)? This is a very ambiguous statement - it can be read two different ways. Either Bartleby is asking whether the reason he has for his own resignation from action is not readily apparent, or he is asking whether the lawyer does not know *his own* excuse for not working. This is the key passage in the story. Instead of facing this challenge, the lawyer immediately finds an excuse - Bartleby's eyes are clouded and he obviously must not be able to see. Bartleby's honest asceticism is a challenge to the deluded laziness of the lawyer and the lawyer does not know how to respond except by this bizarre rationalization for Bartleby's actions.

One must wonder whether the attorneys even has the Schopenhauerian alternative *available* to him. Within this philosophical system, the very fact that the lawyer is in a position of power (which is exercised) thereby makes himself powerless to bring about "a contradiction of the phenomenon with itself" and thus reach "holiness and self-denial" (Schopenhauer 288). The refusal to will on Bartleby's behalf enables him to ursurp the favored way of life of the lawyer: "I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best" (Melville, 3). So we find that the power of the lawyer, which he feels is the way towards the "easiest way of life", actually ends up enslaving him to the renunciation of Bartleby, who refuses any and all means of power. Here Melville presents a political critique embedded in this philosophical landscape - the critique of power and of Northern capitalism. When Bartleby rejects the role he is expected to play within the boss/worker relationship he opens the possibility of renunciation: because he refuses to be defined through a symbolic economic construction (boss/worker) he is left naked and free. "The concept of freedom is therefore really a negative one, since its content is merely the denial of necessity" (Schopenhauer 287). Bartleby prefers not to see himself as a construct with expected (necessary) responsibilities and thus gains the freedom necessary for Schopenhauer's ascetic ideal, while the lawyer conciously mulls over the issue of free will and determinism and willingly continues within the power construct. One cannot be free if one is trying to be free: as soon as one begins to justify actions or to reflect upon a supposed freedom, they have entered into a normative system of reason giving, effectively negating freedom and entering the subject into the realm of necessity (one ought...).

In an ironic twist that is not uncommon for Melville, it is the lawyer himself with sight problems. The grubman at the Tombs mistakes Bartleby for a forger. The lawyer

replies, "No, I was never socially acquainted with any forgers" (Melville 32). What the lawyer doesn't see is that he himself is a forger and is surrounded all day by forgers. He constructs the text in an attempt to gain sympathy from the reader, to try to feel better about himself. The whole point of trying to befriend Bartleby was to "lay up in [the lawyer's] soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for [the lawyer's] conscience" (13). The lawyer wants to be told how great a person he is for acting so humanely with Bartleby, for taking the time to sit down and write this account of his life. Though he spends a large amount of time watching Bartleby stare out the window at walls, he never actually *sees* or understands what Bartleby is doing. Bartleby, on the other hand, understands the lawyer perfectly well. "He did not look at me while I spoke, but kept his glance fixed upon my bust of Cicero, which, as I then sat, was directly behind me, some six inches above my head" (19). Bartleby looks at an inanimate object, just as he would if he had lowered his eyes six inches; in a strange way he *is* still looking at the lawyer - Cicero, the rhetorician, both already dead.

And so we are left with two men who are at opposite ends of the spectrum. Bartleby recognizes his own will to life and his own lack of freedom and leads himself down the path of asceticism towards freedom. The lawyer is completely unaware of anything other than surface reality, which, according to both Bartleby and Schopenhauer, is rather useless. But the problem is that *neither of these men are actually living*. Melville (and Schopenhauer) sets up these two as the thesis and antithesis - but there is no synthesis. In order to gain freedom Bartleby needs to cease living; in order to think he is living, the lawyer must give up freedom. Neither of these options is adequate. One hundred years later this same basic problem is revisited by the absurdists and existentialists - with one major change: the asserted metaphysical state of humans is that of absolute freedom (which can be every bit as oppressive as determinism).

As I mentioned at the outset, Bartleby anticipates a move made by Camus with his idea of Sisyphus as the absurd hero. Sisyphus, too, is an inadequate synthesis in this dialectic, but he is closer than either Bartleby or the lawyer. Living in a state of existential authenticity and having achieved freedom, Sisyphus is a definite step forward. We must admire Bartleby for the courage to attempt what he does, but surely this slow withering into nothingness is not and cannot be the solution to this free will/determinism dialectic? Sisyphus seems even more radical than Bartleby: Sisyphus, fully aware of his freedom, *chooses* to take the rock, to take responsibility. His rock - his burden (his life) - awaits him. Bartleby, presumably, would simply "prefer not" to face this rock. Ah, but the rock remains! Sisyphus asserts a certain dignity absent in Bartleby. "At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lairs of the gods, he superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock" (Camus 121). At the very least Sisyphus recognizes the rock - his world, his fellow men - and has the courage to take responsibility for it, not slipping into the ascetic solipsism of Bartleby and Schopenhauer.

However, despite what Camus has asserted, I have a difficult time imagining a truly happy Sisyphus, endlessly trudging up that damn mountain with his rock, only to come back down and begin again...endlessly (this "endlessly" is important: think just for a second what that word could *possibly* mean for him!). And so we are still on a quest to find our hero, our superman. Or perhaps Schopenhauer is right: "constant suffering is essential to all life" (Schopenhauer 283). Maybe Sisyphus need not be happy.

Ah, Bartleby! Ah, Sisyphus! Ah, humanity!

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