Theology and Literature (4) - An Alien on Wallstreet

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Richard Freadman, Professor and Head of the School of English at La Trobe University (Australia) offers a Jewish reading of Herman Melville's novel Bartleby the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall Street.

Symposium:

THEOLOGY AND LITERATURE (4)

An Alien on Wall Street

by Richard Freadman

I

The Council of Christians and Jews is an organization dedicated to tolerance and understanding. Those words – "tolerance", "understanding" – are easy to say but, as we know all too well, hard to enact. Many of our greatest literary texts are concerned with the nature of tolerance, understanding, and with the relationship between these complex human virtues. In this essay, I propose to read a literary text by one of the finest writers of the nineteenth century, Herman Melville, best known for his metaphysical epic about whaling and the meaning of life, *Moby Dick*. Most of *Moby Dick* takes place on the high seas, but the narrative I want to discuss here is set in a New York law office. (Melville once worked in such an office.) It is called *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall Street*, a scrivener being a law clerk. It is, as you will see, a strange tale about a strange man.

Published in 1853 (Melville lived from 1819-91), *Bartleby* (as I will call it from here on) is a profound and artistically brilliant inquiry into the nature and limitations of human tolerance and understanding. It is a story written by a non-Jew. but it contains the acknowledgment that we are all "sons of Adam" (let us here make mention of Eve and daughters as well!). I will read the story from a Jewish "point of view", not in a doctrinal sense, but insofar as the history of the Jews has wrought in me an urgent concern with tolerance and related challenges that present themselves to those flawed but gifted creatures we call human beings. I might add that Judaism, like Christianity, has insistent focus on the hard business of living an ethical life in the here and now. *Bartleby* is deeply concerned with what it means to live the Good Life in an ethical sense.

II

In barest outline the story is this. An unnamed Wall Street lawyer, who is also the narrator of the

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story, hires Bartleby to work in his office. There are already three employees in the office: an eccentric copyist called "Turkey" – an Englishman in his 60s, given (we deduce) to heavy drinking, bouts of hyperactivity and decidedly imperfect work; another copyist, "Nippers", a man of about twenty-five, is rather tetchy and discontented, and also less than consummate in the performance of his office duties. Then there is the office boy, "Ginger Nut", aged twelve and thoroughly boyish in his ways, who runs errands and does odd jobs. The story begins with portraits of this rather motley crew. The descriptions of them are suffused with a forgiving irony, a wise acceptance of human peculiarity, that also serves as an introduction to the narrator. Early on, the lawyer alludes to the importance of "fellow-feeling" – a phrase that reinforces our sense that he is a decent ethical being; someone who values others not just for their usefulness to him, but because as human beings they are the bearers of certain rights, including the right to respect and the right to enact the particularity of their own selfhood. He even concedes them the right to do this in the workplace, though within reasonable bounds.

It is these people whom Bartleby joins in the office when he is hired as a scrivener. Initially, Bartleby strikes the lawyer as "all neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn"; but, confident that he will be a good worker, he places him at a desk within easy summoning distance from his own. Bartleby"s desk, however, looks out through a window straight on to a wall. All goes smoothly for a time: Bartleby works hard and gets a great deal of monotonous work done. Then, one day when he is particularly hard-pressed, the lawyer summons Bartleby to help check copies of documents that Bartleby himself has drawn up. Whereupon Bartleby utters one of the most famous lines in American literature: "I would prefer not to". The lawyer is thunderstruck, but eventually agrees to exempt Bartleby from the tasks he prefers not to do.

Things get worse. The lawyer finds that Bartleby has taken up residence in his offices; he tries to fire him. When this fails to banish Bartleby from his premises and his life, the lawyer moves his offices. Bartleby remains in the old premises: the landlord summons the police who declare Bartleby a vagrant and take him to the Tombs, where he eventually dies – facing a wall. Throughout this saga the lawyer, at least as he tells it, tries in various ways to help Bartleby: he offers him separation payments, offers to help him find alternative work, visits him at the Tombs. But all to no avail. Moreover, he fails to learn anything about this strange, pitiful, poignant and disruptive apparition of a man. He hears reports and one rumor about Bartleby"s past that he worked for a time in the dead letter office.

I want now to look at Bartleby and the lawyer in turn; to see what they can tell us, both singly and in the way they "interact", about tolerance and understanding.

III

The figure of Bartleby can be understood in many ways – this, indeed, is one of the things that stamps this story as a great piece of imaginative writing. In terms of the sort of intellectual schema we might be inclined to invoke, Bartleby can be seen as an example of a figure that haunted the nineteenth century imagination (and continues to haunt our own): the solitary. The lawyer actually refers to him as "solitary" and says of him that he is "alone in the universe". We associate the solitary particularly with Romantic and post-romantic literature. By contrast, the lawyer is more like the Enlightenment Man of Reason: he espouses the values of rationality, "common sense" (a phrase he actually uses in the story), moderation, balance, and a kind of tolerant sympathy that takes its counsel from a blend of rational appraisal and kindly "fellow-feeling". His sympathy is real – no doubt about that; but, particularly early on, it also has limits: after all, he lives an ordered and essentially conventional professional life. The lawyer is also a Christian: he consults theological writings when trying to decide what to make of Bartleby"s eruption into his life, and the story can be read as a latter-day Christian fable about an encounter between the prepossessing, charitable Christian man, and a wandering alien from human community. Another salient aspect of Bartleby is

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that he is a man without a story; a man who volunteers nothing about his past and cannot therefore be placed by others in a narrative context that enables them to grasp and relate appropriately to his behaviour. The narrator says that Bartleby is "one of those beings about whom nothing is ascertainable".

Anthropologists sometimes describe humankind as "the story-telling animal". Human community is fundamentally constituted through the exchanging of stories, whether it be day-to-day activities like chats over coffee, or the grand cultural narratives (the Bible, the Torah) about the larger meanings of human life. Those like Bartleby who refuse to participate in the communal activity of story-telling tend to incur opprobrium because they are refusing the very medium in which social life takes place. Indeed, it is Bartleby"s disinclination to share his story, rather than his uncooperative attitude to office tasks, that constitutes his most radical act of refusal: "I would prefer not to" expresses the refusal of human community itself.

Bartleby has an extraordinarily "modern feel" about it and this is in part because it describes in strikingly modern terms certain psychological phenomena with which we are all familiar. In modern parlance, Bartleby might be called a "passive-aggressive" personality. The lawyer, indeed, comes close to describing him in just this way: "Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance". Passive-aggression is a potent weapon, and Bartleby"s refusal to engage with another human being, even through the expression of anger, at times drives the lawyer nearly to distraction. If Bartleby is passive aggressive – and since we are never allowed into his mind we can only speculate about this – it represents one of the aspects of his personality that is, so to speak, particular to him. However, we have already seen that Bartleby can be understood in a variety of ways, some of them particular, others according to which he is emblematic of certain human tendencies in general. When the narrator says that Bartleby is "one of those beings about whom nothing is ascertainable", it sounds as though he is identifying a rather rare and small class of human persons. But seen in another way, he is in fact identifying something about human beings in *general*: namely, that to some considerable degree, we are *all unknown, opaque, to one another*. And this applies even to those we "know" best: family, lovers, close friends. Bartleby, then, is emblematic of the strange occluded "otherness" that surrounds every human being like a kind of aura. This, too, is something that the lawyer must try to negotiate.

IV

The lawyer, then, confronts a stern moral examination in the person of Bartleby. Since Bartleby reveals nothing of his inner life, he is – we might say – opaque to the nth degree. This means that however tolerant and sympathetic the lawyer may wish to be towards his aberrant scrivener, that toleration and sympathy cannot be grounded in, or directed by, understanding – at least not by understanding in the sense of being able to grasp something of the inner states and motivations of another individual. Nor can the lawyer hope to maintain his customary equanimity when confronted by a man who has nothing "ordinarily human about him"; a man who is mulish", apparently possessed by a kind of "perverseness", who shows almost no awareness of the usual protocols of behaviour, much less an inclination to observe them; who lacks the trappings that we usually esteem in others: vitality, communicativeness, sexual presence, responsiveness to others and to the world, a sense of urgency associated with commitment to shared values and projects. Little wonder, then, that Bartleby launches his employer on a roller coaster emotional journey in which, in a state of violent and uncharacteristic emotional flux, he experiences rage, bafflement, pity, puzzlement, guilt, moral self-satisfaction, feelings of power which are counterbalanced by feelings of utter powerlessness, almost emasculation – and much else.

Melville"s creative rendering of this inner turmoil is masterly, and one way of describing what happens to the lawyer is to say that this experience of tumult loosens the protective and habitual structures of what has been a benign kind of egotism; that Bartleby inadvertently forces the lawyer

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to take a still more forgiving, a less self-referential, view of the world than he has taken hitherto. He is, in a well worn phrase, humanized by suffering; or, perhaps, more precisely, humanized by bearing witness to or being drawn into, the suffering of a man like Bartleby. The turning point comes when he discovers that his scrivener is living in his office. He reflects that, however strange and infuriating, Bartleby is an "innocent". And then:

For the first time in my life a feeling of over-powering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not unpleasing sadness. The bond of a common humanity drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam.

This sentiment is echoed at the story"s end: its last words are: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!". In other words, Bartleby as an emblematic figure has forced the lawyer into pained cognizance of the often tragic, conflicted and lonely nature of human life. He now knows that the protocols of Wall Street represent an absurdly partial appreciation of the human condition, and that any human being, even one who is an alien on Wall Street, must be addressed in a way that reflects an awareness of that broader condition – an awareness that will inevitably contain traces of the sadness, puzzlement and pain of the world. Such an orientation towards the world and the opaque others who make it up involves understanding of a certain – albeit a partial – kind; and *Bartleby the Scrivener* seems to suggest that it is in this kind of understanding that true tolerance can best take root.

The various religious denominations that make up our communities would do well to ponder this story. It is a story that shows us how the strangeness of the Other can arouse insecurity, puzzlement and rage; how those whose stories are unknown or unlike our own, can threaten our unduly protective and insular sense of community; and that true toleration is a thing that comes with few strings attached, few conditions and without a full understanding of those to whom that toleration is extended.

Christians and Jews live by stories that come, in part at least, from a common root. This can be a source of contact or a source of strife. *Bartleby the Scrivener* seems to tell us that there is safety in conversation; that in sharing stories we might learn enough to connect, but also to accept the fact that there are things about others we cannot learn. After all, what does the lawyer do when confronted with the baffling and disorientating memory of Bartleby? He writes it down; he shares his story with us.

Note:

Bartleby the Scrivener is available in various modern collections of Melville"s work.

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