

A NOTE ON MELVILLE'S "BARTLEBY THE SCRIVENER"

Pre-Raphaelitism belongs to the realm of moral discourse with iconic details (each a unit of realism) taking the place of words; but both words and iconic units are signs¹ pointing in unified fashion to each other and to the collective or choral message. Details in a Pre-Raphaelite painting or poem function in large measure like the chorus in antique Greek drama. Like the significant units of this kind of drama, they are addressed to the *phronimos* (Aristotle's word: the ideal judicious spectator).

Melville proceeds along the same lines in "Bartleby the Scrivener," a Pre-Raphaelite short story wherein Bartleby keeps on asserting "I would prefer not to" (be a 'Raphaelite'; that is, a servile imitator or "dead letter" copyist) and the lawyer-narrator ("The letter of the Law killeth, the spirit giveth life") reveals himself as hopelessly conventional ("safe," "prudent," "earnest": the correct Academic artist by analogy) and confesses to never having "addressed" a jury (*phronimos*). At the end of the story, the lawyer pays "silver" (Judas motif) to make Bartleby's stay in prison more comfortable; but his blind-alley humanitarianism falls far short of the mark of charity (*caritas*) to which he is summoned by the wraithlike Bartleby. On a literal level, he recognizes that the jailed Bartleby is in the yard of the Tombs (Resurrection motif), "there for the murderers and thieves" (Barabbas and Dismas), but he does not understand that he himself is in much subtler ways both murderer and thief. He concludes his narrative by informing us that earlier Bartleby had worked in Washington as a clerk in a "Dead Letter Office." Of such

"dead letters" he says, ". . . by the cart-load they are annually burned." Frequently, he observes, they contain messages or items of "charity," "pardon," and "good tidings." The word "Gospel," of course, means "good tidings." However, the lawyer's concept of charity remains constricted, and the story misfires for him as it ends on the purely humane level: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!"

The Pre-Raphaelite irony is that Bartleby had "addressed" himself to the lawyer, the lord of "No.—Wall Street," as Jesus had silently addressed himself to Pilate; but the lawyer resorted to money to buy him away, as it were, rather than to the available spiritual funds of *caritas*, the basis for all truly significant human interrelationships. Two kinds of redemption ("buying back") are in conflict here, one originating in "humanity," the other in God's will for mankind as personified by the mysterious Bartleby. In other words, Bartleby (Bar: "son of"; *teilen*, "to divide"; by: town or "city": thematically, "Son of a divided city," the scandal of a fragmented Christianity and its consequences in our lives) signified his Christliness in Pre-Raphaelite fashion to a beholder who was not a *phronimos* since his prudential wisdom was wholly of this world.

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¹By way of corollary, partisan critics continue to misread Tennyson's very Pre-Raphaelite poem "Saint Simeon Stylites" by failing to understand in precisely what way the persona is (line 14) "A sign betwixt the meadow and the cloud."