



BEYOND COMPREHENSION: BARTLEBY, THE LAWYER AND THE LIMITATIONS OF RATIONAL THINKING

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Abstract

Socrates, more than any earlier philosopher, was preoccupied with the idea of using reason and observation to understand the world, a practice that not only underpins the scientific method today, but also laid the foundation for Western thinking. Later, in the 17th century, the Enlightenment further championed reason, science, and individualism over religious authority and tradition. Intellectuals of this period posited that human progress could be realized through the use of reason, critical analysis, and the integration of scientific knowledge. In response, Romanticism emerged toward the end of the 18th century, in part, as a reaction to the Enlightenment's elevation of reason, logic, and scientific thought as the foundational sources of knowledge and societal advancement. Thinkers and artists of the Romantic movement sought to challenge the supremacy of reason by foregrounding other dimensions of human experience: emotion, intuition, imagination, and the sublime. This study argues that Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" explores the limitations of rational thought. While most critics discussing this text have entered their analyses of Bartleby in an effort to interpret his perplexing behavior, examining the causes behind his sudden refusal to engage in any form of work and his passive withdrawal from life, this study intends to shift the focus to the lawyer's inability to understand Bartleby. The paper argues that his failure stems from his almost obsessive reliance on intellectual reasoning which eventually prevents him from confronting the deeper complexities of the human experience as embodied by the copyist.

Keywords: *rational thought; limitations; Romanticism; communication failure; irrationality.*

From Socratic dialogue to Enlightenment rationalism, Western intellectual tradition has been inclined to privilege reason as the most reliable philosophical tool for understanding the world. Socrates' maieutics, grounded in rational inquiry and examined life, laid the foundation for a specific tradition of philosophical thought that would be revived and refined during the Enlightenment, when thinkers such as Descartes, Locke, and Kant placed unprecedented faith in the power of logic, empirical observation, and critical reasoning. The Enlightenment ideal was explicit: human progress, whether viewed from a moral, political, or scientific perspective, may be achieved through the disciplined implementation of rational thought. In his famous definition, Kant described the Enlightenment as "man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity," urging individuals to "dare to know" (*sapere aude!*) and to use reason as their guide (17). In this vision, knowledge was attainable, behavior explainable, and society open to improvement, provided individuals remained committed to clarity of thought, logic, and analysis.

Yet this rationalist framework, though profoundly influential, has been repeatedly contested. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Romanticism developed as a powerful movement that challenged the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and objectivity. Romantic writers and artists highlighted the importance of emotion, intuition, imagination, and the sublime, suggesting that the most profound aspects of human experience might elude rational comprehension. The sublime, as Edmund Burke famously argued, is that which is able to produce astonishment (27-30). Consequently, the sublime, the irrational, and the mysterious emerged as central concerns, signaling a heightened awareness of the limitations of purely intellectual inquiry.

It is within this larger philosophical tension that Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" can be situated. Frequently interpreted as a meditation on alienation, modern labor, or passive resistance, Melville's story also invites reflection on the limitations of rational understanding.¹

¹ Furthermore, Melville appears to have been influenced by the thinking of Arthur Schopenhauer, the father of philosophical pessimism, particularly in regard to his ethic of detachment from worldly life and its obligations. On April 1, 1853, just a few months before Melville wrote "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (the story appeared in the November and December issues of *Putnam's Magazine*, which at the time aimed to publish the best young American writers), the first

While most critical readings have focused on *Bartleby*, more precisely on his strange withdrawal from the world and his enigmatic refusal to comply, this paper attempts to shift the focus to the lawyer-narrator and his persistent, yet ultimately futile, attempts to comprehend *Bartleby's* behavior. Trained in the methods of legal reasoning, negotiation, and managerial order, the lawyer seems to stand as a representative of the Enlightenment ideal of the rational subject. Yet, by the end of the story, his efforts to explain, categorize, or even remedy *Bartleby's* condition prove futile, leaving him bewildered and oscillating between frustration, pity, and philosophical confusion.

I argue that the lawyer's failure is not simply a clever narrative device but a significant thematic statement: "*Bartleby*" dramatizes the limits of rational thought when confronted with a subject who resists interpretation. Melville's story thus becomes a subtle yet powerful exploration of the epistemological stalemate that arises when Enlightenment reasoning meets the unclassifiable other. The result is not just a portrait of individual bewilderment but a literary meditation on the limitations of comprehension itself. I am not alone in this approach. In a 1974 study, R. K. Gupta likewise concludes that in "*Bartleby*" Melville sought to expose the limits of reason and underscore the importance of imagination and intuition.

Throughout "*Bartleby*," the lawyer-narrator consistently approaches life, and later, *Bartleby* himself, through the lens of reason. This reliance on rational thought, logic, utilitarian ethics, and empirical common sense is not only a marker of his professional identity but also the very framework that ultimately proves inadequate in the face of *Bartleby's* quiet defiance: "his outlook on life is clear, unambiguous, and uncluttered by mysticism or imagination" (Gupta 66). From the outset, Melville positions the lawyer as a man who values order and predictability: "the easiest way of life is the best" (3) is his motto, a maxim that encapsulates both his pragmatic outlook and his preference for stability over disruption. This simple precept functions as both a personal philosophy and a rhetorical baseline for interpreting his world, structuring his judgments and informing his decisions. It casts the lawyer as a figure who privileges routine over confrontation, peace over conflict, someone who equates ease with virtue.

English summary of Schopenhauer's work appeared in *Westminster Review* and *Foreign Quarterly*, a journal that Melville appears to have read (Stempel and Stillians 269).

He is not equipped to face existential crises or radical ambiguity, conditions that most people encounter as a normal part of life. The moment Bartleby enters his life, enigmatic, passive, yet powerfully resistant, the lawyer finds himself utterly unequipped to deal with this challenge. Moreover, he cannot confront Bartleby directly, lacking both the temperament and the conceptual framework to do so. As the present analysis will show, he tries first to reason with Bartleby, then to cajole him, to threaten him, to offer him help, and ultimately to flee by relocating his office, all efforts proving equally ineffective. And given that confrontation is not “easy,” he constantly avoids it. In fact, the lawyer’s motto positions him as Bartleby’s foil: whereas the scrivener seems to enact a refusal impervious to logic and utility, the lawyer maintains a worldview that incessantly seeks to avoid conflict and complexity. It is this very tension between a man who “prefers not to” and one who prefers not to deal with it that gives the story its unsettling power.²

Moreover, the lawyer’s rationalism is manifest even in his early assessments of Bartleby, shaping the way he interprets and responds to the copyist’s behavior. For instance, the decision to hire him is based on an assumption of efficiency and predictability. However, Bartleby’s first refusal, “I would prefer not to,” immediately disrupts this logic. The lawyer responds not with outrage or emotion, but with confusion: “Immediately it occurred to me that my ears had deceived me, or Bartleby had entirely misunderstood my meaning” (Melville 10), revealing his struggle to interpret a behavior that eludes categorization. This prompts a closer analysis of the lawyer’s reliance on reason.

The unnamed lawyer claims to have met numerous scriveners during his career of over 30 years and to have carefully analyzed them.³ However, as evidenced by his interactions with Turkey, Nippers, and Bartleby, it seems he has not achieved a profound understanding of human nature. One possible explanation for this fundamental failure warrants consideration. A potential explanation can be found by analyzing the philosophical framework through

² An interesting interpretation is also offered by Codrin Liviu Cuțitaru, who identifies the key to understanding the text in the natural tension between “a man of assumptions,” the lawyer, and “a man of preferences,” the scrivener (74).

³ Perhaps Melville’s choice of leaving the lawyer unnamed is precisely to emphasize the story’s allegorical and philosophical dimensions, with his anonymity reflecting the universality of his rationalist limitations that are examined in the present study.

which the lawyer interprets reality, the fundamental principle underpinning his worldview. Indeed, the metaphor that best illustrates the lawyer's failure is the bricked-up window in his office. Reason, the sole lens through which he views reality and which he applies with almost religious fervor, represents a potential window, an opening that could lead to the outer world and to apprehending the mystery of reality beyond the self. Thus, the bricking up of this window, a literal and symbolic obstruction, aptly illustrates the promise of reason: that through it, we might achieve genuine understanding. This promise, however, proves to be a dead end.

The first time the lawyer employs the term "reason" is during a conversation with Turkey, in which he timidly reproaches him for coming to the office in dirty, malodorous clothes: "Concerning his coats, I reasoned with him" (Melville 7). Unfortunately, his attempt to find a rational solution to this problem proves unsuccessful. Turkey is not persuaded by the lawyer's arguments and, when offered a new coat, responds not with gratitude for his employer's generosity but with insolence, prompting the lawyer's harsh conclusion: "[Turkey] was a man whom prosperity harmed" (Melville 7).

The narrator's first response to Bartleby's refusal reinforces his reliance on rationalism and his incapacity to go beyond its grid. After being asked to perform a simple task, Bartleby unexpectedly replies, "I would prefer not to," (Melville 10) and the lawyer's emotional reaction of surprise is immediately replaced by a "rational" inference, assuming that Bartleby either did not hear properly or failed to comprehend the request. By suggesting Bartleby might be "moon-struck," the lawyer implicitly positions himself as sane, rational, and socially competent, contrasting with Bartleby's incomprehensible passivity. Unsurprisingly, after repeating the request and receiving the same illogical reply, the narrator's reaction is to fire the insolent scrivener on the spot. However, he restrains himself: "But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors." (Melville 10).⁴ The reference to Cicero is by no means accidental. The great politician, orator, and

⁴ A parallel image famously appears in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven", where, upon entering the student's room, the ominous bird settles directly on top of the bust of Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and strategic thought, an indicator of the tension between reason and imagination in American Romantic literature.

philosopher adeptly applied sophisticated rational discourse in both his legal and philosophical works. Clearly, the lawyer models himself on the Roman master, striving for the same logical, balanced, and persuasive approach to reasoning. By aspiring to emulate Cicero, the lawyer aligns himself with the traditional philosophical framework that prizes logic, order, and clarity above all else and views these qualities as essential tools for navigating both his professional and social life. Furthermore, this preoccupation with Cicero also illuminates the lawyer's worldview: he perceives human behavior and social interaction as ultimately intelligible, subject to rational analysis and effective management. Ironically, Bartleby remains impervious to any kind of rhetorical strategy, despite the lawyer's increasingly desperate attempts.

Bartleby's second refusal constitutes a pivotal moment in his relationship with the lawyer. Again, the lawyer's initial reaction is astonishment: "for a few moments I was turned into a pillar of salt" (Melville 11). Immediately, reason takes hold of him again: "Why do you refuse?" The interrogative *why* is the very axis around which all rational investigation revolves. For the narrator, it becomes an obsessive refrain that mirrors Bartleby's persistent "I would prefer not to." Ultimately, the lawyer assumes that people act for intelligible reasons, that all human behavior is susceptible to rational explanations, a belief that Bartleby's resistance dramatically challenges. By directing this question at Bartleby, he seems to enact the Enlightenment confidence in transparency and causality, assuming that the motivations behind human behavior can always be made transparent.

Nevertheless, Melville, a skeptical Romantic, does not hasten to confirm the Enlightenment's faith in the omnipotence of reason. Accordingly, Bartleby's refusal to justify his attitude is perceived by the lawyer as a denial of reason itself. What frustrates him is that Bartleby appears to inhabit a different ontological plane, one that rejects the cause-and-effect logic that constitutes the lawyer's credo. The key words that prove his insistence on the power of reason follow one another with increasing frequency: "I began to reason with him" (Melville 11), "You are decided, then, not to comply with my request – a request made according to common usage and common sense?" (Melville 11), or "He begins, as it were, vaguely to surmise that, wonderful as it may be, all the justice and all the reason is on the other side" (Melville 12).

Significantly, the lawyer's genuine interest in Bartleby emerges only after this inexplicable sequence of refusals. The underlying motive, however, does not arise from Christian concern for one's fellow human being, as some commentators of Melville's work suggested, but rather from a kind of irritating curiosity. In truth, he grows frustrated by his inability to make sense of the clerk's behavior and feels compelled to investigate its cause. In doing so, he fails to see Bartleby as a person in genuine distress, an individual experiencing emotional or psychological turmoil. He seems to be concerned only with discerning the cause, that is, the rational explanation for the copyist's refusal, and with attempting to persuade him through rational means to resume his work as a scrivener.

Following yet another refusal from Bartleby, he again attempts to engage him by appealing to logic. "Surely you do not mean to persist in that mulish vagary?" (Melville 13) and, somewhat later: "What added thing is there, perfectly reasonable, that he will be sure to refuse to do?" (Melville 14). It is worth noting once again the frequency with which Melville employs terms related to the discourse of reason. Moreover, when he finally expresses deep indignation and dissatisfaction with Bartleby, he does so in language deeply rooted in the same steadfast belief in the power of reason: "how could a human creature, with the common infirmities of our nature, refrain from bitterly exclaiming upon such perverseness – such unreasonableness?" (Melville 15-16).

On one occasion, the lawyer does briefly yield to emotion in his astonishment when realizing that Bartleby was actually living in the office where he worked, being the only nocturnal inhabitant of Wall Street, a street that emptied immediately after work hours:

For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not unpleasing sadness. The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam. (Melville 17).

Here, the lawyer seems to move beyond the language of reason into the register of shared emotion and biblical reflection. His melancholy contrasts with his previously detached, almost aesthetic sadness, suggesting that Bartleby's suffering forces him into a deeper and unfamiliar emotional register.

Furthermore, he momentarily perceives a fraternal connection within a theological framework, acknowledging that both of them were sons of Adam.⁵ Yet even this flash of empathy is framed in abstract, almost rhetorical terms, revealing how difficult it is for him to sustain genuine human connection without retreating into formulaic or elevated language. His problem is that the pity, compassion, and fraternity he feels toward his employee are immediately transformed: “My first emotions had been those of pure melancholy and sincerest pity; but just in proportion as the forlornness of Bartleby grew and grew to my imagination did that same melancholy merge into fear, that pity into repulsion.” (Melville 18). The feeling of repulsion underscores the tension between the lawyer’s initial compassion and the disruptive presence of Bartleby, whose passive resistance unsettles both his repressed emotions and his reason.

Notably, when the lawyer makes one more attempt to persuade Bartleby to change his attitude and receives once again the reply “I would prefer not to,” he exclaims in exasperation: “But what reasonable objection can you have to speak to me?” (Melville 19). The scrivener’s response is a deep silence, while his vacant gaze fixes on the bust of Cicero. This is a scene of particular symbolic tension. Bartleby’s gaze conveys a profound, unspoken message: he seems to symbolically look at the entire tradition of rational rhetoric from the outside, as if it were a foreign body. This silent scrivener who defies all systems of rational exploration positions himself firmly on the other side of the symbol of Western reason, rules and eloquence. The confrontation between these two worlds, though tacit, can be seen as Bartleby’s refusal to accept Cicero’s logical articulation: silence vs. language, irrationality vs. reason. This can be interpreted as a dramatization of the failure of humanist ideals to explain the alienation of the modern individual, in other words, the failure of reason to investigate the abyss of the human soul. This refusal to engage with the world is even clearer when the lawyer tries again to communicate with Bartleby:

‘Say now you will help to examine papers tomorrow or next day: in short, say now that in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable – say so, Bartleby.’

⁵ The theme of fraternity is central to Melville’s work, artfully explored in *Moby-Dick* (1851), particularly through the bond between Ishmael and Queequeg.

‘At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable,’ was his mildly cadaverous reply. (Melville 20)

Arguably, this is the most poignant line in the entire short story. The phrase “to be a little reasonable” implies that Bartleby is expected to make a minor compromise, or at least pretend to feign participation in the social conventions in order to remain tolerable to the lawyer. Bartleby is asked not for wholehearted cooperation but merely for a simulacrum of conformity. But the copyist rejects the entire social logic and, by extension, any compromise with the world. The lawyer’s appeal to reason here is strategic: it is less about caring for his employee and more about his obsession with understanding or even control. He wants Bartleby to conform, to re-enter the system, to accept logic, and eventually to stop questioning his conviction that reason explains everything. Yet Bartleby prefers not to. To Bartleby, reason is not a tool to be adjusted at will, a performance that one can dial up or down as convenience dictates. What occurs here, on a deeper level, encapsulates the central paradox of the story: that reason, when confronted with quiet consistent refusal, with irrationality even, loses its authority and explanatory power. The clerk neither argues nor engages in confrontation - Thoreau’s passive resistance comes to mind⁶- but merely withdraws and opts out. It is what makes him unclassifiable, incomprehensible, and at times seemingly irrational: “Melville carefully refrains from identifying the source of Bartleby’s problem, because Bartleby’s very irrationality is the point of this story.” (Gupta 68).

It is therefore unsurprising that the lawyer is profoundly unsettled by Bartleby’s refusal to account for his behavior. When the scrivener is caught staring at a wall in what is described as a “dead-wall reverie”, the following dialogue occurs:

‘Why, how now? what next? exclaimed I, ‘do no more writing?’

‘No more.’

‘And what is the reason?’

‘Do you not see the reason for yourself?’ he indifferently replied. (Melville 21)

⁶ Thoreau’s concept of passive resistance, articulated in his seminal essay “Civil Disobedience” (1849), emphasizes the moral and political power of nonviolent refusal to comply with unjust laws or authority. Rather than engaging in active confrontation, the individual asserts agency through deliberate nonparticipation.

Bartleby's cryptic response frustrates the lawyer because it challenges his compulsion to rationalize, offering neither justification nor insight. This positions Bartleby as fundamentally inscrutable, defying the assumption that human behavior can always be made transparent to reason. By offering neither justification nor elaboration, he asserts a quiet and mysterious autonomy that renders him enigmatic and unapproachable, emphasizing his complete detachment from social and professional expectations. In light of this answer, it is perhaps predictable, to someone acquainted with the basics of human psychology, that Bartleby ultimately ceases to live, effectively dying through his refusal to eat.

However, the lawyer-narrator remains unaware of this reality. He interprets Bartleby's behavior as a communication error, something to be clarified or fixed through dialogue and logic. As the copyist continues to resist, the lawyer tries to categorize him through familiar psychological or moral frameworks. Each attempt at diagnosis is an effort to render Bartleby intelligible and thus to restore rational order. But each attempt fails. Eventually, the lawyer abandons any hope of managing or understanding his clerk and moves his offices, an act he justifies with bureaucratic detachment: "No more, then. Since he will not quit me, I must quit him. I will change my offices; I will move elsewhere; and give him fair notice, that if I find him on my new premises I will then proceed against him as a common trespasser." (Melville 28). This retreat signals not just a logistical decision, but an epistemic failure. Reason cannot resolve the riddle of Bartleby. The final line of the story reveals the lawyer's collapse into affective uncertainty: "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!". This is not a conclusion but a confession. The lawyer's reliance on logic and persuasion has brought him no closer to understanding the man who silently dismantled his worldview. Consequently, the lawyer's very reliance on reason becomes his greatest liability. His interpretive framework is fundamentally inadequate to the mystery his employee embodies. In trying to "make sense" of Bartleby, the lawyer moves through a series of increasingly desperate hypotheses - perhaps he is melancholy, mentally ill, lazy, or overworked - but none of these explanations prove sufficient. Crucially, he cannot accept that some forms of behavior may lie outside the scope of comprehension altogether. His persistent rationalizing, what he calls his prudence and method, reveals not just a failure of understanding, but an almost obsessive need for coherence.

Thus, Melville's narrative subtly exposes the lawyer's limitations by showing how his rationalism, though humane, becomes a mode of avoidance. He prefers reason because it protects him from emotional risk and existential uncertainty. When Bartleby ultimately refuses all interaction, retreating into absolute silence and inaction, the lawyer reaches the end of his interpretive rope. His inability to impose meaning on Bartleby results in a breakdown, not of the scrivener, who remains eerily consistent, but of the narrator's intellectual and moral framework. In this way, the lawyer mirrors the Enlightenment subject undone by his own assumptions. His failure is not a failure of kindness or will, but of epistemology. The tools of reason he so confidently wields prove powerless in the face of the radically unknowable. Through the lawyer, Melville stages a subtle but scathing critique of rationalism's blind spots: its discomfort with ambiguity, its insistence on order, and its ultimate inability to comprehend the full range of human experience:

In "Bartleby" Melville clearly suggests what is confirmed by modern psychology: that men are nor primarily creatures of reason, but are controlled by dimly perceived instinctual drives and obscure impulses, and that this being so, one needs much more than reason and common sense to deal effectively with human problems. (Gupta 68)

Bartleby becomes what philosophers might call a limit case: a scenario that exposes the assumptions and internal contradictions of a given system of thought. What makes the copyist so unsettling to the lawyer and to readers is the way he occupies a space of radical indeterminacy. Is he a symbol of alienation in capitalist society? A depressive? A mystic? A nihilist? A deranged person? Melville withholds all background information that might anchor his character to a stable identity. The only personal detail the lawyer uncovers is that Bartleby once worked in the Dead Letter Office, an institution that, in its handling of lost messages, becomes a powerful metaphor for communication without reception, meaning without destination. Bartleby, in this sense, is himself a dead letter, a message that cannot be read, decoded, or delivered. His implacable presence, his slow withdrawal from all forms of engagement, generates precisely this kind of cognitive and emotional vertigo. The lawyer, despite his best efforts, cannot assimilate Bartleby into any familiar narrative of causality or even redemption. Confronted with this silent and persistent refusal, he faces a fundamental

epistemological crisis: what does one do when meaning itself refuses to manifest and remains inaccessible?

Ultimately, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” stages a subtle but profound philosophical confrontation between the certainties of Enlightenment rationalism and the opaque, unsettling realities it fails to comprehend. The lawyer, as a representative of reason, finds his favorite tools – logic, persuasion, classification – utterly inadequate in the face of Bartleby’s persistent and silent negation. His failure is not merely personal but emblematic of the limitations of reason. In Melville’s skeptical hands, reason is not altogether abandoned but is rigorously tested, and ultimately found wanting.

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