Melville’s “Bartleby” and the Doctrine of Necessity

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I

In calling attention to thematic complexities found in Melville’s fiction, Jay Leyda remarked that “buried in each story is at least one hint for the hunter; sometimes it is a named book spread open before the searching reader—as Jonathan Edwards’ Inquiry into the Freedom of the Will is opened in ‘Bartleby.’”1 But Mr. Leyda might have also mentioned that Joseph Priestley’s The Philosophical Doctrine of Necessity is alluded to in the same passage in “Bartleby,” so that in this case not one but two books are “spread open” before the reader searching for the meaning of this complex and powerful story. The question is, what hint does the double allusion furnish?

Apparently, the answer is that the allusion invites the reader to consider the story in the context of the doctrine of necessity, which both Edwards and Priestley discussed in the treatises named. It is significant that the reference directs attention not simply to two extended treatments of necessitarianism itself but specifically to two key terms in this doctrine. For, in the shortened title form in which Melville’s attorney-narrator refers to the works—“several days now passed, during which, at leisure intervals I looked a little into ‘Edwards on the Will,’ and ‘Priestley on Necessity’”2—the allusion both introduces and juxtaposes will and necessity. A central postulate of the necessitarian doctrine was that necessity, operating as prior causes or motives, determined the will, acts of willing in substance being acts of choosing or preferring, even a negation representing a choice “of the absence of the thing refused.”3 In “Bartleby,” Mel-

2 Quotations from the story used in this article are from ibid., pp. 3-47.
ville presented a character consistently engaged in "preferring not" to alter the pattern of his behavior, yet one whose freedom to do as he pleases is obviously quite limited and who suffers from his futile attempt to act in accordance with his preferences. In view of the focal emphasis placed upon willing and necessity, as well as upon the associated issues of the liberty or freedom that the individual can claim to act by his preferences and the reason for and justification of human suffering, it is plausible to interpret the story as a dramatization of the doctrine of necessity. If such an interpretation goes a bit further than Melville intended the allusion to lead the reader, it is nevertheless true that reading the story in terms of necessitarianism will add a new dimension to the range of meanings so far found in it.

II

An earlier reference Melville made to "will" and "necessity" in Chapter 47 of *Moby-Dick* where Ishmael and Queequeg are weaving a mat is pertinent to this discussion. Using his hand as a shuttle, Ishmael keeps "passing and repassing the filling or woof of marline between the long yarns of the warp" while Queequeg drives the heavy marline threads into place with a wooden sword. To Ishmael, it seems as if this "were the loom of time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates"; and he visualizes the "fixed threads of the warp" as necessity and the marline or the woof as the will, which "was still free to ply her shuttle between given threads," but yet rigidly controlled by the "straight [and fixed] warp of necessity." Thus, the will has a degree of freedom, but it is the freedom to operate only within the strict limits of necessity, which both determines and controls its operation.

The concept of limited free will which this scene dramatizes is quite similar to the viewpoint that the necessitarian philosophers advocated and is in thorough accord with the position that both Edwards and Priestley took on the will in their treatises. In brief, this position was that every volitional determination has a prior cause or motive just as the one before it had a cause or motive, and so on back and back in an endless chain, the first link of which rests in God's hand. "The constant determination of mind, according to the motives presented to it" constituted its "necessary de-
termination," Priestley said; thus "how little soever the bulk of mankind may be apprehensive of it, or staggered by it, according to the established laws of nature, no event could have been otherwise than it has been, or is to be, and therefore all things past, present, and to come, are precisely what the Author of Nature intended them to be, and has made provision for." In explaining the actual mechanics of how the will operates, Priestley saw two circumstances involved whenever a person makes a choice or reaches a resolution to pursue one course of action as against another. These were "the previous disposition of the mind ... and the ideas of external objects [or alternates] then present to the mind, that is, the view of the objects [i.e., with respect to liking or disliking, preferring or not preferring] which the choice or resolution respects" (p. 26). This predisposition of the mind, which both Edwards and Priestley also called the "inclination" of the mind, always leads to the same choice, to the assertion of the same preference, whenever the same objects or alternates are presented for choice and there is no change in the view taken of them. Consequently, the predisposition or inclination of the mind and the choice or resolution made represent the working of the law of cause and effect, which Priestley, a scientist, saw operating in the will's determinations as precisely and exactly as it operates in nature, as when a stone is thrown into the air and gravity pulls it back to the earth. Because the will thus operates in accordance with "a fixed law of nature" (p. 174), he insisted that "in no case whatever" could the volition determinations a person makes "have been otherwise than they actually were" (p. 43). He further insisted that "the determinations of what we call the will are, in fact, nothing more than a particular case of the general doctrine of the association of ideas, and therefore a perfectly mechanical thing ..." (p. 36).

III

A number of different viewpoints have been advanced to explain the peculiar stance that the title character of "Bartleby" assumes as a "man of preferences." Maurice Friedman, for example, has stated that Bartleby "retains responsibility for his will," though

*Joseph Priestley, The Philosophical Doctrine of Necessity (London, 1777), pp. 7-8. Subsequent quotations, with pages indicated in the text, will be from this edition. The italics in quoted passages are Priestley's.*
“it is the will of willfulness, the will of the man who is sick in his relations to others and to himself.”6 R. H. Fogle, viewing the attorney-narrator as standing for God or fate in respect to the scrivener, has contended that in this role the attorney “does not . . . deprive Bartleby of his free will. . . .”8 Mario L. D’Avanzo has described Bartleby as “free-willed,” holding that “the repeated remark, ‘I would prefer not to’ is a statement of choice.”7 Other interpreters have implied that Bartleby had free will by explaining his strange behavior as a heroic assertion of independence and individuality over “normally accepted conventions,”8 as the protest of a “naysayer in a yea-saying culture,”9 or as the posture of a man who has decided “to withhold his consent” to live “a pointless existence in a meaningless universe.”10 But obviously any viewpoint which asserts or implies that the poor scrivener had the freedom to will as he wills in the story and is thus partly or wholly responsible for his own destiny is in direct conflict with the necessitarian doctrine. For, in terms of it, he must be seen as a victim of “fixed fate” who is powerless to alter the pattern of his volitional determinations or preferences even though they lead finally to a preference not to eat and therefore for death instead of life.

Two facts regarding the manner in which Melville presented Bartleby in the story are of particular importance from the standpoint of the necessitarian concept of willing. First, as the attorney tells the reader, Bartleby is not only a person “by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness,” but also the victim of “an innate and incurable disorder.” Since the reader has only as much information about Bartleby as Melville chose to have the attorney reveal, it is not clear whether the “innate disorder” was the “hopelessness” Bartleby was prone to or, on the other hand, whether the hopelessness was an attitude resulting from the “disorder.” Regardless of whether it is properly described as “hopelessness” or something else, it is nevertheless clear from the action of the story that

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8 "Melville’s ‘Bartleby’ and Carlyle," The Melville Annual, 1965, p. 120.
Bartleby has a decidedly marked temperamental inclination or "pre-disposition" and that it remains unchanged throughout the story. Second, it is equally evident that the view Bartleby takes of things remains as fixed and unaltered from the beginning to the end of the story as his predisposition does; or if it changes, it changes only by becoming more deeply fixed as the action advances.

Quite literally, the fixity and sameness of Bartleby's view is dramatized by the walls he faces in the story. These are described in such detail and referred to so frequently that it is evident Melville intended the reader to attach a special importance to them. At one end, the attorney's chambers, which are located "upstairs" at No.____ Wall Street, looked out "upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious skylight shaft"; and at the other end, the "windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade. . . ." The attorney places Bartleby's desk "close up to a small side-window" which looked out on the wall of a building only three feet away. Then, to complete the arrangement, the attorney places "a high green folding screen" between Bartleby's desk and his, which isolated Bartleby from his sight but left him within reach of his voice. Though these walls varied in color by being white, black, or green, Bartleby faces a blank wall no matter what way he looks. Further, after he gave up working as a copyist, he frequently stood facing a wall in what the attorney describes as a "dead wall reverie"; and when the attorney found Bartleby dead in the prison courtyard, he lay huddled at the foot of a thick masonry wall, with his face turned toward it and his "dim eyes . . . open."

Priestley remarked that "the will is but a kind of judgment, depending upon the perceived "preferableness of things proposed to the mind, which apparent preferableness results as necessarily from the perception of the ideas themselves, as that of their agreement or disagreement" (pp. 33-34). Throughout the story, Bartleby's perception or view evidently remains as blank and fixed as the walls he faces, for at no point does he change his judgment about what he prefers. He invariably settles every choice which involves following a course of action different from the one he is pursuing by "preferring" not to accept the alternate. When he is still working as a copyist, he "prefers not" to proof copy or run errands; when he "gives up" copy-
ing he “prefers not” to leave the attorney’s office, to answer questions put to him by the attorney’s legal associates or, later, to take any of the various jobs the attorney offers to secure for him. “I like to be stationary,” he tells the harassed attorney near the conclusion of the interview on the stairway. “Stationary you shall be, then,” the attorney replies. While on the surface Bartleby’s dogged assertion of preferences seems to provide evidence that he is a “wilful” or even “free-willed” individual, the necessitarian approach suggests to the contrary that he is “programed” by his fixed disposition and unchanging viewpoint to will as he wills and that he has no more control over the direction of his “preferences” than a machine would have.

IV

Bartleby’s preferences in themselves, however, are not the source of his difficulties; rather, his problems, as well as those he creates for the attorney, arise from his determined attempt to claim the liberty or freedom to follow the line of behavior these preferences dictate. This struggle for liberty forms the central conflict of the story and poses issues fully as important to understanding Bartleby’s predicament as are those relating to the operation of his will.

Even though the necessitarians conceived of the will as being rigidly governed by necessity, or causes foreign to itself, they insisted that individuals have the freedom to do as they will, to act in accordance with their preferences. Priestley, for example, remarked: “I allow to man all the liberty, or power, that is possible in itself, . . . which is the power of doing whatever they will . . . both with respect to the operations of their minds, and the motions of their bodies, uncontrolled by any foreign principle, or cause” (p. 2). Edwards said essentially the same thing: “The plain and obvious meaning of the words Freedom and Liberty . . . is power, opportunity or advantage, that any one has, to do as he pleases. Or in other words, his being free from hinderance [sic] or impediment in the way of doing, or conducting in any respect, as he wills.” Further, in a footnote, he added: “I say not only doing, but conducting; because a voluntary forbearing to do, sitting still, keeping silence, &c., are instances of persons’ conduct, about which liberty is exercised; though they are not so properly called doing.”

11 Edwards, op. cit., p. 279.
If Melville read this footnote it must have put a gleam in his eye; for Bartleby’s leading preference is for remaining stationary and “keeping silence.” Yet, as the action of the story plainly shows, he is able to exercise even this modest type of liberty for a short time only before he is led away to be shut up behind the walls of the Tombs Prison. It follows therefore that while his freedom to do as he pleases was less rigidly limited than his will, it was still quite limited. The necessitarian explanation of the restrictions placed on freedom is simply that there is a vast difference between being at liberty to do as one pleases and having the power to do as he pleases. In making the distinction between the two, Priestley quoted Hobbes:

Liberty is the absence of all impediments to action, that are not contained in the nature and intrinsic quality of the agent. As for example, water is said to descend freely, or to have the liberty to descend, by the channel of the river, because there is no impediment that way, but not across, because the banks are impediments. And though the water cannot ascend, yet men never say it wants liberty to ascend, but the faculty or power; because the impediment is in the nature of the water, and intrinsically. So also we say, he that is tied wants the liberty to go, because the impediment is not in him, but in his bands; whereas we say not so of him that is sick or lame, because the impediment is in himself. (pp. 2-3)

From the action of the story it is evident that both extrinsic and intrinsic impediments limit Bartleby’s freedom to do as he pleases. The first type of impediment, which can be described in general terms as the necessary restraint society places on individual liberty, manifests itself early in the story when Bartleby’s preferences lead him to refuse to proof copy or run errands. At this early stage of his attempt to act by his preferences, Bartleby has done nothing more serious than break the ground rules of the attorney’s office by avoiding duties the attorney is accustomed to having his scriveners perform. Even though Bartleby’s behavior creates a degree of inconvenience, the attorney values his diligence as a copyst and can tolerate this personal eccentricity, which appears to him to be no worse than that of his other two clerks, Turkey and Nippers. (They have alternating “off” and “on” moods extending through a half-day but fortunately intermeshing, so that one is in an “on” mood while the other is in his “off” mood.) But as the action of the
story advances, Bartleby's preferences lead him into a more serious conflict with the lawyer and with society than is represented by the early stages of the conflict; and as his eccentricity increases, so do the restraints placed on his liberty increase. That is, when he "gives up" copying but yet prefers to remain in the attorney's office he totally violates not only the accepted rules of the employer-employee relationship but also the larger assumptions of society on which these relationships are founded. In effect, these require that the man who does not wish to play the game according to the established rules should at least step aside so as not to be a hindrance to others. "What earthly right have you to stay here?" the attorney demands of Bartleby. "Do you pay any rent? Do you pay taxes? Or is this property yours?" To these questions, Bartleby makes no reply, and his predicament worsens rapidly.

It is significant that, had the attorney been able to keep Bartleby hidden behind his screen and therefore concealed from public view, he still would have been able to bear with him, even though by now the scrivener has become completely eccentric and wholly unreasonable. In this respect he stands in sharp contrast to Turkey and Nippers, who are eccentric and unreasonable only part of the time and therefore still co-operating members of the attorney's team. At one point, after he has made several unsuccessful efforts to get Bartleby to leave, the attorney resolves to persecute him no more but simply to let him continue to live silently behind the screen. The attorney, however, cannot keep Bartleby from the public view; for the attorney's legal associates who come to his office on business see the scrivener there and began to think it strange indeed that he permits so peculiar a person to occupy his office—one who seems privy to the attorney's affairs, yet neither works nor speaks. The upshot is that the attorney moves to different quarters, and Bartleby is first evicted from the building and then arrested and carried to prison when he refuses to leave the stairway outside the office. Thus, it is the "impediment" or pressure of society which deprives Bartleby of the liberty of doing as he pleases up to the time he is imprisoned. Thereafter, of course, he encounters the second and even more fatal type of impediment, that of natural law, which requires that one must eat to live.
From the foregoing discussion, it should be clear that so far as the situation of the title character is concerned "Bartleby" is indeed a story of "Wall Street," or more correctly, of the "walled" street, the street of necessity, down which the "pallid" scrivener must travel to his death. He is not only compelled to will as he wills but is also denied the liberty of acting in accordance with his preferences. If the story is interpreted primarily in the light of Bartleby alone and what his situation seems to imply regarding the human predicament as echoed in the concluding line of the story, "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" it surely must be seen as expressing a darkly pessimistic attitude. For if man's volitional acts are dictated by a scheme of "Fixed Fate," operating through his predisposition and his view of things, so that his choices or preferences represent compulsions instead of free will, but he yet lacks the freedom to act by these preferences, then he is indeed in a pitable situation, a mere plaything of a sadistic, merciless Fate. Bartleby, however, is only one of two main characters, and what happens to him is but part of the story. The attorney is a no less important character; and while the real focus of the story is on neither Bartleby nor the attorney but on the relationship between the two, it is important now to consider what happens to the lawyer during the course of his prolonged struggle with Bartleby. Before discussing the attorney's role in the story, it is necessary to examine briefly the necessitarian viewpoint on evil and human suffering, particularly as described by Priestley.

Whereas both Priestley and Edwards were in agreement about the issues of will and liberty, Priestley objected to Calvinism, finding it a "most gloomy" system (p. 161), and its tenets of innate depravity, election, and eternal damnation inconsistent with the scheme of philosophical necessity. The necessitarian scheme, he contended, compelled us to view "every being . . . and every thing . . . in a favorable light," to see God as "equally the father, and the friend, of the whole creation" (p. xi), and to understand that "all seeming discord is real harmony, and all apparent evil, ultimate good" (p. ix). For these reasons, "difficulties, opposition, persecution, and evils of every other form . . . are the necessary instruments by which . . ." human beings are advanced toward perfection (pp.
ix, xi). Thus, while the God of Calvinism is an angry God, dooming all mankind but a select few to everlasting punishment, the God of Priestley's brand of necessitarianism is a benevolent God using evil and suffering as a means for effecting the greater good of all mankind. In the necessitarian scheme God, as the creator of all things, is the author of evil and suffering as well as of good (p. 105), but in the vastness of the total scheme, of which man is permitted to see only a minute part, the "evils are infinitely overbalanced, and therefore truly annihilated, in the greater good to which they are subservient, and which . . . they really heighten" (p. 110). Moreover, it is not simply that an individual's struggle against the evil and misfortune which has been visited upon him may strengthen that individual's virtue but also that "according to the most fundamental laws of nature, and indeed the very nature of things, great virtues in some [i.e., persons] could not be generated, or exist, but in conjunction with great vices in others; for it is this opposition that not only exhibits them [the virtues] to advantage, but even, properly speaking, creates them" (p. 125).

It is particularly in the context of this last statement—namely, that opposition or conflict not only brings out virtues but in fact "creates them"—that we can now examine the attorney's role in "Bartleby." It will be recalled that in the very passage where the attorney alludes to reading in the works by Edwards and Priestley he "gradually . . . slid into the persuasion that these troubles of mine, touching the scrivener, had all been predestinated from eternity, and Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an allwise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like me to fathom." Even though Melville may have had his tongue in his cheek when he made the attorney engage in this reflection, it is nevertheless clear that the attorney's "persuasion" that his troubles with the scrivener were predestined by Providence for a specific purpose fits the Priestley necessitarian concept. What "mysterious purpose," then, is served by the visitation of Bartleby upon the attorney and by the prolonged struggle and turmoil that

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12 If Calvinistic predestination were the frame of reference for Bartleby, we would need to view him as the victim (at least in his suffering while on earth) of an arbitrary Fate which doomed him to a pointless existence. Under the necessitarian doctrine, he is not less the victim of "Fixed Fate," but the big difference is that his misery and suffering will be found to have a meaning and purpose—that is, he has not lived his life and suffered for no reason at all.
results therefrom? From the standpoint of the necessitarian doctrine as advocated by Priestley, there is only one answer to this question: the purpose of Bartleby’s apparently senseless and futile struggle was to “create” virtue in the attorney, to arouse him from a smug self-complacency to a painful and profound sense of compassion and sympathy for all mankind.

To view the attorney in a favorable light and contend that his sense of humanity deepens during the course of the story as the result of his exposure to or “conjunction with” Bartleby’s misery is to adopt a position counter to viewpoints several recent commentators have expressed. One scholar sees him as an embodiment of the tragic limitation of human understanding and charity; another considers him a symbolic representation of the shallow, materialistically overridden Christianity of mid-nineteenth century America; and few have had anything more favorable to say about him than that he is to be viewed as a reasonable man of good intentions, a fairly “normal,” comfortably situated individual, who in temperament and circumstances therefore stands in dramatic contrast to the eccentric and “forlorn” scrivener. The contention here advanced, however, is not that the attorney has no limitations, for it is clear that he, too, is traveling along his own “walled” street of necessity, his volitional determinations being no less directly related to his predisposition than Bartleby’s are; rather the contention is that the attorney’s struggle with Bartleby arouses the attorney emotionally—so much so that as a result he develops a feeling of compassion for humanity he has never had before, the sense of which is expressed in his concluding exclamation, “Ah Bartleby! Ah, humanity!”

The emotionalism of this statement, as well as the emotional intensity of the final phases of the attorney’s struggle to aid Bartleby, stands in sharp contrast to the calm opening of the story, where the attorney draws a somewhat humorous and certainly self-depreciatory portrait of himself preparatory to narrating his experience with the scrivener, and that this experience still puzzles and troubles him he implies at the outset by remarking that the scrivener was “the strangest I ever saw, or heard of.” The attorney describes

himself in a candid manner, almost as though he were writing his “confessions” and now in retrospect identifying both his weaknesses and strong points: “I am a man who, from youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best”; “I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never address a jury, or in any way draw down public applause; but, in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men’s bonds, and mortgages, and title-deeds.” And he goes on to mention that his “grand” points are “prudence” and “method,” that he seldom loses his temper, and “much more seldom indulges in dangerous indignations at wrongs and outrages.” Thus, as the reader sees him through his own words at the beginning of the story, he is a man of easygoing disposition who, even though dedicated to the pursuit of his own interests in his chosen way, has the kind of even-tempered outlook on life which suggests that he is kindly disposed toward humanity, and that his general attitude is one of “live and let live.” It is of significance that even in the midst of the hurry and bustle of Wall Street, the nerve center of commerce and business, where his office is located, he has withdrawn into a “snug retreat,” where his legal activities revolve around documents instead of the flesh-and-blood human beings the documents pertain to.

“Into “the cool tranquillity” of the attorney’s “snug retreat,” into the smooth-flowing complacency of his balanced and ordered existence, comes Bartleby—“pallidly neat, pitiable respectfully, incurably forlorn!”—to plunge the attorney, who has avoided jury trials, into the most severe trial he has ever experienced, the attorney’s own conscience serving as the “jury” which hears the “case.” In the early stages of his encounter with Bartleby’s preferences, the attorney is not deeply involved emotionally. Bartleby’s “aspect” convinces him that the scrivener “means no mischief” and that “his eccentricities are involuntary” (as by the necessitarian doctrine, they are). So he resolves to humor Bartleby, for the scrivener not only is “useful” to him, but the attorney can also “cheaply pur-

18 Is Melville making his narrator recreate himself as he was at the beginning of the encounter with Bartleby rather than after?

19 Documents of the sort he handled—bonds, mortgages, title deeds—specifically embody the “assumptions” commerce and business operate on. While the attorney respects “assumptions,” Bartleby’s preferences lead him into conflict with them.
chase a delicious self-approval” for himself by befriending Bartleby instead of turning him away, where “the chances are he will fall in with some less-indulgent employer.” To this point, the attorney’s attitude toward Bartleby is a mixture of kindness, curiosity, and self-gratification: he is not yet seeing Bartleby as a misery-ridden, suffering individual and so can pride himself on being tolerant and kindly disposed toward him. But his attitude changes and his sympathetic involvement with Bartleby begins to grow from the point at which he learns that Bartleby has been actually living in the office. “Immediately . . . ,” the attorney says, “the thought came sweeping across me, what miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible!” The attorney is no longer thinking about how his treatment of Bartleby reflects credit on himself, but rather is now stirred emotionally by the predicament of a fellow human being. He goes on in this same passage: “For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced ought 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.”

From this scene forward, where the revelation of the scrivener’s “miserable friendlessness and loneliness” initiates the attorney into the darker, more melancholy aspects of humanity, the attorney’s sense of identification with Bartleby, together with his awareness of the common bond of humanity, grows stronger and stronger. When the attorney one day enters his office resolved that he will dismiss Bartleby, he “strangely felt something superstitious knocking at my heart, and forbidding me to carry out my purpose, and denouncing me for a villain if I dared to breathe one bitter word against this forlornest of mankind.” Still later, when he has firmly resolved again to send Bartleby away, he says “I speak less than truth when I say that, on his own account, he occasioned me uneasiness,” and he feels that the scrivener is “alone, absolutely alone in the universe. A bit of wreck in the mid Atlantic.” While the attorney’s sympathy deepens as the story progresses, his composure buckles now and then under the severe trial Bartleby brings to his patience and to his commitment to brotherly love. In the passage where the attorney “assumed” that Bartleby would quit his office but finds that
his assumption is wrong—indeed, Bartleby teaches him that many of his assumptions are wrong—the attorney flies into a "sudden passion" and demands of Bartleby, "Will you, or will you not quit me?" But, he informs us, he grappled with and threw "this old Adam of resentment, by recalling the divine injunction: 'A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.'" The "wise and blessed frame of mind" the attorney has now developed toward Bartleby is suddenly dispelled by the hostile attitude of his professional friends toward him as a result of his having the pale, silent scrivener in his office. When he decides that he must move his office to be rid of Bartleby or else lose his business, he stands in the entry as he is departing looking back at Bartleby "while something from within me upbraided me." So he parts from Bartleby, but "strange to say—I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of." The attorney's compassion has now been thoroughly aroused.

The attorney has only two more encounters with the scrivener. The first of these occurs when he returns to his old office at the request of his former landlord to remonstrate once more with Bartleby, who has now been evicted from the office by the new tenant but has taken up his position on the stairway bannister outside the office door. The attorney gives Bartleby the choice of a variety of different kinds of jobs—a clerkship, bill collector, bartender, and traveling companion—all of which Bartleby declines, and though he insists that he is "not particular," he does "like to be stationary." Overcoming his momentary indignation at Bartleby's intractable position, the attorney offers to take him into his own home until "some convenient arrangement" can be made at leisure. But Bartleby prefers "not to make any change at all" and the attorney is now at the end of his rope. This offer to take Bartleby into his own dwelling, it might be noted, represents the high point in the attorney's growth in sympathy, and those who have stressed the attorney's limited charity have perhaps underemphasized the goodness to which he has now risen. What more could one man do for a less fortunate "brother" than to take him into his own home and aid him to make a new start? This encounter left the attorney in such an emotional turmoil that he precipitately rushed from the building as though he were being pursued, and for several days
“drove about the upper part of the town and through the suburbs,” visiting Jersey City, Hoboken, Manhattanville, and Astoria.\(^{17}\)

The final encounter occurs when the attorney learns that Bartleby has been led away to prison and he goes there to see him, where he finds him, “standing all alone in the quietest of the yards, his face towards a high wall, while all around, from the narrow slits of the jail windows, I thought I saw peering out upon him the eyes of murderers and thieves.” Bartleby stonily rebukes him: “I know you . . . and I want nothing to say to you.” The attorney, then, in the end is utterly impotent in his efforts to do anything for Bartleby. As has been said, “His well-meant attempts to soften Bartleby’s lot by overlooking irregularities, by special indulgence, by employing existing channels, by placating the authorities have all failed, like other well-meant tentative that end up in the dead-letter office. They were too late, like the letters.”\(^{18}\) But the real point of the story is not what the attorney attempts to do for Bartleby; rather it is what Bartleby has done for him. Twice near the end of the story the attorney uses forms of the word *compassion*—once when he describes the bystanders watching Bartleby being led away to prison as “compassionate and curious” and again when he tells the prison functionary that “Bartleby was . . . greatly to be compassionated.” The introduction of these words reflects the feeling of deep compassion the attorney has now developed, a feeling dramatically summarized in the concluding line of the story, “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!”

Thus, through his exposure to Bartleby, the attorney who had never before felt any deeper emotion than “a pleasing sadness” has been aroused to a new awareness of the human predicament, where “Fixed Fate” hands out misery and suffering to some and better fortunes to others, but where both good and evil are essential components of the total scheme, incomprehensible though it may be.

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\(^{17}\) In discussing the attorney’s flight, Raymond W. Short and Richard B. Sewall suggest that the attorney “having recognized the hand, though not the words, of God . . ., like Jonah, flees—to Jersey City and Hoboken, Manhattanville and Astoria. His former complacent worship of John Jacob Astor has given way to confusion and turbulence of soul” (“Bartleby the Scrivener,” *A Manual of Suggestions for Teachers Using Short Stories for Study*, New York, 1956, p. 48). While Short and Sewall do not consider “Bartleby” in the context of necessitarianism, their interpretation of story as an “allegory” on “man’s responsibility to man, according to Christian definition” takes essentially the same viewpoint as I have developed here in terms of necessitarianism.

While a necessitarian reading of "Bartleby" conflicts with many interpretations which have been made of the story, it does not conflict with those which view the scrivener as Melville or, more broadly, as the writer in general who is at odds with his public.¹⁹ One commonly accepted idea of the writer's function is that of arousing a complacent public to a compassionate understanding of the human lot, of showing in his works, as Howells said, that "men are more alike than unlike one another" so that "all may be humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity."²⁰ This is the role the scrivener plays with respect to the attorney, as has been shown. Moreover, just as the scrivener in the story persisted in the attempt to assert his preferences despite the difficulties he thereby created for himself, so the writer often continues to write as he must or can, even when he falls into public disfavor, as Melville continued to write during the 1850's. In fact, Leo Marx has contended, "Bartleby" deals "with a problem unmistakably like the one Melville had described to Hawthorne" in his "dollars damn me" letter of 1851.²¹ In part, this letter runs as follows: "The calm, the coolness, the silent grass-growing mood in which a man ought always to compose,—that, I fear, can seldom be mine. Dollars damn me.... My dear sir, a presentiment is on me,—I shall at last be worn out and perish.... What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot." The dilemma Melville here describes, that of finding it unprofitable to write what he was most interested in writing, yet unable to write what the public wanted, parallels to a degree the predicament in which he placed his scrivener. Finally, just as the full "message" of a writer is frequently understood only after his death, so in "Bartleby" the attorney can perceive and articulate the meaning of what the scrivener has aroused him to—"Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!"—only after the scrivener has died.

¹⁹ One of the most persuasive interpretations in this vein is Leo Marx's "Melville's Parable of the Walls," Sewanee Review, LXI, 602-627 (Autumn, 1953).
²¹ Marx, p. 602.