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Melville's Dead Letter:

He Who Can Write Paley and with a Cadaverous Nonchalance

In Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby," the title character is not given much of a physical description when he is first introduced. Instead, he is simply described as "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, (and) incurably forlorn" (Melville 2630). The way that the narrator, the head of a "business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds," describes Bartleby here gives the reader some sense of what Bartleby might look like (Melville 2625). It is interesting that he uses three adverbs in order to give this initial description of Bartleby. Instead of telling the reader that Bartleby looks pale, sick, or how he is dressed, the picture that the reader's first impression is based solely on adverbs. As well, the adverbs are not joined with verbs; instead, they are said in relation to three different adjectives. Throughout the entire story Bartleby's image grows and develops simply by the narrator adding adverbs in place of a similar description that he gives of his other employees – Nippers, Turkey, and Ginger Nut. At the same time, many of these adverbs are similar and do not vary widely. The narrator, on the other hand, can range from being "strangely goaded", "ignominiously repulsed", and having "spasmodic passions" (Melville 2633-35). Such a contrast between Bartleby and the other characters in their descriptions shows a perverse dehumanization toward Bartleby, the titular character.

Some of the adverbs used to describe Bartleby make him appear to be a humble and non-confrontational individual. For example, even when the narrator pressures him about his

unwillingness to examine his papers, Bartleby's response is still the same as before (i.e., "I prefer not to"). However, when he gives this response even after being pressured, the description "he respectfully and slowly said, and mildly disappeared" follows his refusal (Melville 2634). This slowness also mirrors Bartleby's "slow scrape of his chair legs on the uncarpeted floor" that the narrator hears when he calls for Bartleby to examine his four copies of a legal document earlier in the story (Melville 2631). Later in the story, Bartleby's use of the word "prefer" begins to spread through the other clerks and it becomes a focus point before the narrator considers getting rid of him. Immediately after this consideration, the following scene takes place, and the reader should keep in mind that the adverb used on Bartleby does not differ from the previous ones considered:

The next day I noticed that Bartleby did nothing but stand at his window in his dead-wall revery. Upon asking him why he did not write, he said that he had decided upon doing no more writing. '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 2639)

Even while this news is shocking to the narrator, Bartleby still gives his announcement in an indifferent tone. Thus, the narrator tries to attribute this response to Bartleby's health instead of considering that Bartleby is actually refusing to do the work just as he says. This change in the narrator shows the power of Bartleby's actions even when they are so simply described.

From adverbs such as indifferently, mildly, slowly, respectfully, the reader gets the sense that Bartleby is not a violent person, which is a quality that must be taken into consideration when he is taken to prison and when he is first pressured to leave the office. The reader should note that he will not do anything unusual outside of copying his work. He will not take three

minutes to go to the post office or help the narrator with any other such task in the beginning, but he later decides not to do any work at all. Just by looking at these adverbs, one can infer that Bartleby also does not seem like too unusual of a person. However, Bartleby is not always described as replying indifferently, mildly, or moving silently. When the narrator asks Bartleby to be reasonable, the narrator relates Bartleby's response as "mildly cadaverous" (Melville 2638). What is striking about the phrase is that it puts Bartleby in comparison with a dead body when he is giving one of the firmest denials of the story. Cadaverous isn't even a verb (nor is it really an adjective), yet it is paired with the adverb "mildly." As well, it is hard for one to consider how a dead body would reply because it is, in fact, dead and cannot do so. This is not the first time that Bartleby is described in comparison to something that is non-living. For example, Bartleby is "like a very ghost, agreeably to the laws of magical invocation" (Melville 2634). However, in this description the adverb that is used is "agreeably," which fits in well with the other adverbs that have been used to describe his actions.

One critic would agree with the narrator's comparing Bartleby to a ghost and having a cadaverous way of doing things. Johnny Lorenz, the author of "Escape from the Dead Letter Office" notices the following about Bartleby:

Bartleby in the eyes of his peers and superiors, is himself a dead letter (referring to the idea that Bartleby worked at The Dead Letter Office), passing through the hands of various employers who do not know how to read him, or how to handle him. He is therefore put out of circulation. He is indecipherable and intolerable. (Lorenz 75)

To the narrator, Bartleby might be indecipherable, but he is not intolerable. The narrator tries to figure out why Bartleby does some things and tries to find reasons for these actions (such as his health). However, the narrator tries to cope with Bartleby's actions the best way that he can.

Instead of having Bartleby arrested, the narrator takes the trouble of moving the business to another location.

In regards to how Bartleby is described, he is indeed compared to a ghost and a cadaver, but he is also described as having a “flute-like tone,” and frustrating the narrator with his “mulish vagary” (Melville 2632, 2634). The comparison to a musical instrument, in contrast with the death-related descriptions, serves to put some life into Bartleby. As well, it is interesting that Bartleby is described as such when Turkey makes a reply on the same page to the narrator’s question using “his blandest tone” (Melville 2632). Later in that scene, Bartley makes his usual reply to a request that the narrator makes, and the narrator responds by asking, “How? Surely you do not mean to persist in that mulish vagary?” (Melville 2634). Here, Bartleby’s actions are compared to an action associated with that of a living animal. However, one must take into consideration the word “vagary,” which is traditionally defined as being an unpredictable or erratic action. In this instance, the narrator already has an idea of what Bartleby’s response would be, so there should have been nothing unpredictable about it to the narrator. At the same time, there is very little contest to Bartleby’s being mulish or stubborn.

Most of the descriptions regarding Bartleby (adverb or otherwise) tend to give the reader the impression that Bartleby is humble, gentle, and alive, but also stoic. Three such adverbs are even used in the same sentence when the narrator first describes Bartleby’s writing. The three words used (silently, palely, and mechanically) all give off the above impression of humbleness, gentleness, and a stoic demeanor. When Bartleby first refuses to write, his “gray eye” is described as “dimly calm,” and this description also gives off the same impression. Even the image of cadaverously replying and indifferently putting up a resistance adds to the same impression. Thus, most, if not all of these descriptions – which mostly come through adverbs –

agree on the same image and relate to one another. As well, Bartleby is – at least by the narrator – regarded as a human with an aspect that “sufficiently evinces that his eccentricities are involuntary” (Melville 2633). Whether this is really the case or not is left up to the reader to interpret.

Bartleby’s passivity and non-violent nature, which the adverbs support, lead to an unintended consequence. The focus is on Bartleby’s actions and not on who Bartleby is as a person. The reader gets very little description of how Bartleby dresses other than his being “eminently decorous,” and even in this description an adverb is used (Melville 2636). One consequence of where the focus lies is in the storytelling itself. In two main instances, Bartleby’s characteristics take over how he is described, which is demonstrated by the narrator’s use of the passive voice. Instead of relating that Bartleby’s passiveness irritated the narrator, the narrator relates that “the passiveness of Bartleby” is the cause of his irritation (Melville 2633). The second major time that the narrator uses passive voice, he describes that “the forlornness of Bartleby grew and grew” to his imagination (Melville 2637). In these two descriptions, it can seem to the reader that Bartleby’s actions are taking over how he is seen as a person. That is to say that he is regarded less and less like a person. Earlier in the story, the narrator ruminates to himself about Bartleby working for him. When he thinks about this, he names Bartleby a “valuable acquisition” – a term that would be used on a material possession (Melville 2635).

While Bartleby is described using similar adverbs and being degraded from his status as a human, the narrator enjoys experiencing a wide variety of actions. While Bartleby’s passiveness irritates the narrator, he becomes “strangely goaded on to encounter him in a new opposition” (Melville 2633). Bartleby, it seems, cannot be goaded into any other emotion than indifference, respect, and calmness. As well, the narrator battles against being “ignominiously repulsed” by

his hired clerk while Bartleby is not said to do anything of the sort even though his job is to meticulously copy legal documents (Melville 2634). Bartleby is not described about being passionate about anything, yet the narrator tries to “avoid falling into sudden spasmodic passions with him” (Melville 2635). Thus, even the head of this business can have a much greater range in emotions and actions than someone who works directly below him.

Since Bartleby is not given a real physical description or a description of his character, the reader can sense an immediate contrast with Nippers, Turkey, and Ginger Nut, the other employees in this office. The reader receives a great deal of detail from the narrator, “an obtuse observer representing the class of ‘gentlemen’ whose smug prosperity rested on the extorted labor of the workers they dehumanized” (Karcher 2623). The narrator even goes through the trouble of explaining how Nippers’s and Turkey’s “fits relieved each other like guards” and other such characteristics (Melville 2629). However, he might be seen as dehumanizing toward Bartleby because he neglects to give him a description of such length. Instead, Bartleby’s description comes from adverbs that are similar to one another, which does very little in telling the reader about how Bartleby is as a person. Even outside the text, Bartleby is dehumanized when compared to money which is “valueless but is given currency; it is put into circulation and thus achieves its purely symbolic value” (Lorenz 76). Bartleby, on the other hand, is not circulated. He is a dead letter, an idea that illustrates dehumanization at its best.

Adverbs and the general description – or lack of – that the narrator provides for Bartleby work together in an attempt to illustrate to the reader who this character is. However, it is the small amount of description the narrator gives that dehumanizes Bartleby. It is also dehumanizing that the chosen adverbs describe how Bartleby is comparable to inanimate objects like a cadaver and a dead letter. While the other characters in the story receive varied

descriptions of their actions and personalities, Bartleby is rarely described as having any characteristics other than calmness, indifference, gentleness, cadaver-like responses, and mechanical gestures. Such dismissive treatment on the narrator's part grossly underplays Bartleby's role as the title character of the story and, more importantly, as a person.

Works Cited

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