CRITICAL
STUDIES
I might as well be talking to the wall as talking to you.
—Mr. Alleyne, in James Joyce, “Counterparts”

At the start of Herman Melville’s short story “Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street,” originally published in 1853, the narrator, an elderly lawyer, speaks of a “singular set of men” of whom, as far as he knows, “nothing” has “ever been written—... the law-copyists, or scriveners” (92). Since then, at least one other major writer—James Joyce—has written a story centering on such a scrivener: “Counterparts.” Melville’s lawyer says of his scrivener that he was “the strangest I ever saw, or heard of” (92). Nothing that we shall discover in this essay about Joyce’s scrivener, Farrington, will match Bartleby for strangeness. Nor, I should stress at the outset, is my bringing the two scriveners together meant to discuss or even suggest any sort of possible “influence.” I am confident that Joyce would not have known what was at that time an obscure tale by a largely neglected writer when he wrote his own story in 1905. I am not in any case interested in the question of influence; for my purposes, the fact that there was surely no awareness on Joyce’s part of Melville’s story makes it all the more intriguing to compare and contrast the two works, and above all the two men: Joyce’s brutal bully and Melville’s passive victim.

So different are the two characters, actually, that at first it would seem that only the contrasts between them and their tales are worth mentioning, and that their one genuine point of convergence is their mode of employment. On the evidence of both stories, the job of the scrivener—that is, of copying legal documents in those pre-Xerox days when typewriters were also either nonexistent (as in Bartleby’s time) or not yet widely accepted for legal purposes (as in Farrington’s)—would seem to have been tedious, mechanical, and alienating: a daily grind demanding no thought and yielding little self-respect.
Such characteristics seem especially emphasized in Melville's story. It is narrated by Bartleby's employer, a New York lawyer who tells about his office and its two scriveners, Turkey and Nippers, and the errand-boy, Ginger-Nut; the lawyer had determined that there was too much work for his current staff and so advertised for another scrivener. In response, one day "a motionless young man" (99) stands upon his threshold: Bartleby. The lawyer hires him, and for a time the young scrivener's work is exemplary, and Bartleby does "an extraordinary quantity of writing" (100). So it is all the more surprising when the lawyer, having asked him to help examine some previously copied work, hears from Bartleby the reply, "I would prefer not to" (101). The lawyer feels at that moment too busy to pursue his anger, but he does so a few days later upon again hearing the scrivener use that enigmatic phrase: "I would prefer not to." The other members of his staff agree with him that Bartleby's behavior is reprehensible and even outrageous, but in view of the young man's excellent work otherwise, and his quiet demeanor, the lawyer does not turn him out, even when, as the days go by, the same response is forthcoming when any request is made of Bartleby—and indeed when he eventually stops copying altogether. At around that time, as well, the lawyer discovers that Bartleby apparently never leaves the office premises, before or after work hours, subsisting on "nothing but ginger-nuts" (104). Attempting to be sympathetic, the lawyer pleads with the young man to provide information about his background, but Bartleby replies only that he would prefer not to reply. The lawyer at last fires him, but to no avail: Bartleby simply remains in his little corner, behind his screen and facing a wall opposite the office window.

The lawyer comes to feel that he is no longer in control of his own offices, and in a kind of panic he resolves that if Bartleby will not leave, he will; so he changes his premises. Even after the move takes place, Bartleby continues to haunt the old offices—and then, when turned out by the new tenant, the building. Returning there on the plea of the landlord, the lawyer is so touched by Bartleby's plight that he offers to take him with him—not to the new offices but to the lawyer's own home; but Bartleby replies that he would prefer not to. Days later, the lawyer hears that the police have removed Bartleby and taken him to the Tombs, the prison in the Halls of Justice. The lawyer visits him there, where Bartleby says, "I know you... and I want nothing to say to you" (128). The lawyer arranges for the young man to be treated and fed well, but when he returns
a few days later he finds Bartleby huddled at the base of the wall, dead. In a postscript of sorts, the lawyer informs us that some months later he heard a rumor that Bartleby had once worked at the Dead Letter Office. "Ah, Bartleby!" he ends his narrative, "Ah, humanity!" (131).

"Bartleby the Scrivener" is a complex, packed work, perhaps overdone in parts and not always in full control of its ambition; but for all that it is a genuine masterpiece, an obsessively haunting tale. Joyce's "Counterparts" is finally less ambitious, but on its own it is also masterful, perhaps even flawless. It succinctly recounts the events of a single day in the life of a man who would seem to be not so much a Bartleby as an anti-Bartleby.

Farrington, already regarded by his employer—the lawyer Mr. Alleyne—as a shirker, has failed to complete some copies when they are needed, and when asked to provide them he tries to pretend he knows nothing about them. In front of the entire staff, his furious employer asks him, "do you take me for a fool? Do you think me an utter fool?" Before he realizes it, Farrington replies, "I don't think, sir...that that's a fair question to put to me" (91).

Threatened with the loss of his position, Farrington must apologize abjectly for his witticism. At the end of the day, he is still thirsty—despite his having sneaked off to a pub during working hours—and in need of a night out with his friends, so he pawns his watch. His story of the incident at the office is a success with his chums, but as the pub crawl continues the evening is disappointing. He spends too much money, is frustrated when he feels unable to respond to an apparently flirtatious woman in one pub, and then loses an arm-wrestling contest to Weathers, a younger man. On his way home, he feels "humiliated and discontented; he did not even feel drunk; and he had only twopence in his pocket. He cursed everything. He had done for himself in the office, pawned his watch, spent all his money; and he had not even got drunk" (96-97). His wife not at home, he asks his son Tom about his dinner. The young boy says he is going to cook it; but Farrington sees that the fire has been allowed to go out and, furious, viciously beats him with a walking-stick. Terrified, the boy squeals, "Don't beat me, pa! And I'll...I'll say a Hail Mary for you...I'll say a Hail Mary for you, pa, if you don't beat me...I'll say a Hail Mary..." (98).

Obviously, there is a marked difference in the reader's degree of sympathy or, certainly, identification with the protagonist of each
story. Joyce forces us to understand a brute like Farrington, and—I shall attempt to show—to realize our own kinship with him, but most of us are readier to identify with his son, or even with Bartleby. Many readers who seem to have no qualms about identifying themselves with a catatonic and schizophrenic like Bartleby—as the existential victim—would recoil with repugnance at any attempt to associate them with Farrington, or indeed with either of the employers in the stories. Such readers are ready enough to sentimentalize Bartleby’s plight by turning him into a prophet, wiser in his “irrational” existence than the rest of humanity in its desperate “sanity.” Yet it does not take so romanticized a view of Bartleby to feel that there is an integrity in his self-destructive and futile mode of behavior that is lacking in Farrington’s self-deceptive and futile modes of rebellion.

Not to put too fine a point on it, Farrington is after all a “ruffian.” The term is Mr. Alleyne’s—hardly a totally sympathetic or unbiased judge of Farrington’s character—but the narrative voice of the story uses not dissimilar terms, as we hear that Farrington feels “savage and thirsty and revengeful” (92), or that he is “full of smoldering anger and revengefulness” (96). Bartleby, in contrast, is said to be a “poor, pale, passive mortal...a helpless creature” (123). Each character is given the sort of physique that would be expected, given their roles: Bartleby the victim is described as “lean,” and as “thin and pale” (109, 111), while Farrington the bully is “tall and of great bulk,” and he walks “with a heavy step” (86).

They contrast with one another in additional physical ways as well. Bartleby is constantly in stasis. He seems never to move: “I like to be stationary,” he remarks in his exasperating mode of understatement (126). Farrington is constantly hyperkinetic: “his body ached to do something, to rush out and revel in violence” (90). He leaves the office whenever he gets the chance (Mr. Alleyne accuses him of taking extra-long lunches, and of never being there when he is wanted; and we see him pretend to go to the men’s room when he is actually going out to a pub)—in contrast to Bartleby, who is at first praised by the lawyer for the fact that he is always there: “I observed that he never went to dinner; indeed, that he never went anywhere. As yet I had never, of my personal knowledge, known him to be outside of my office” (104). In time the lawyer becomes less sanguine about this clinging, static quality in his scrivener, who finally refuses to quit the lawyer’s office altogether.
As all that suggests, the relationships between employee and employer in the two stories are also studies in antithesis, as are the employers themselves. Mr. Alleyne is impatient and short-tempered. While there has been some critical disagreement about the efficacy of the lawyer's good intentions in "Bartleby the Scrivener," and some critics have attacked, for example, his "exploitative" role as a representative of "Wall Street," few of us mere mortals (as distinct I gather from literary critics) could claim to be as patient, as generous, or as long-suffering as Melville's lawyer, who tries—truly sincerely, it seems quite clear, however ineffectively or hopelessly—to deal with and confront Bartleby's painful case. It is true that he is the one to tell us, but there seems little reason to disbelieve the lawyer's assertions that, for example, "I seldom lose my temper; much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages" (93); and it is clearly accurate for him to claim, as he does, that (unlike Mr. Alleyne, certainly) he resorts to "no vulgar bullying, no bravado of any sort, no choleric hectoring" (117). In contrast, we see no reason to doubt Farrington's fear that from now on "Mr. Alleyne would never give him an hour's rest; his life would be a hell to him" (92). To give Mr. Alleyne his due, he does not have a model employee in Farrington, who surely would be an exasperating person to have in one's office.

So would Bartleby, no doubt. Yet in the end it is the psychological and spiritual differences between the two scriveners that seem, at least at first, to control our views when we look at them together. Both men are self-defeating; but Farrington's mode of self-destruction follows what is, unfortunately, probably the more usual pattern. For he strikes out, bitterly and openly, at other people as well, even resorting to—seeking out, and ready to "revel in"—violence: "he longed to execrate aloud, to bring his fist down on something violently" (90). In some ways, he seems closer to the other scriveners in the office of Melville's lawyer than to Bartleby himself: to Nippers, for one, who, "if he wanted anything, it was to be rid of a scrivener's table altogether" (96). Nippers, however, is "at least, a temperate man" (98), so Farrington—with his determination "that he must have a good night's drinking" (87)—seems even more like Turkey, as they both practice a profession that Joyce's scrivener would agree is, in Melville's lawyer's words, "a dry, husky sort of business" (98). Turkey is notorious in the office for becoming less agreeable and
more irascible and cantankerous after his lunch, when he has had some beer, which leads him to be (like Farrington, after his glass of porter) "rash with his tongue—in fact, insolent" (95). The alcohol also makes both men prone to violence: in the morning, Turkey seems the soul of patience with respect to Bartleby's odd conduct; after experiencing the "effects of beer," however, he displays "combativeness," throwing "his arms into a pugilistic position" and offering to "go and black his eyes" (105, 106). In contrast, Bartleby, whose "pale face clearly indicated that he never drank beer like Turkey" (111)—or Farrington—displays "freedom from all dissipation," and "great stillness" and "unalterableness of demeanor under all circumstances" (107). He is a completely nonviolent person, whose stance takes the form of totally passive resistance—a "poor, pale, passive mortal" (123). Fascinatingly, his rebellion is ultimately no less real than Farrington's, and much more effective in many essential ways: "nothing," as Melville's lawyer points out, "so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance" (104). Yet, after all, Bartleby's rebellion is also self-defeating, and hardly a model for others to emulate.

In that and in other key ways as well, despite all these contrasts between the protagonists of the two stories, the similarities between the two men, and between their plights, are much more revealing and suggestive, if subtle and surprising. The comparison may suggest that similar forces are present in their lives—however ultimately difficult it may be to pin down those forces—which make them both not merely unwilling but unable to get down to work, to copy their papers: to get along in their worlds. Bartleby's inability (or unwillingness) to copy is all too obvious as his story proceeds. Farrington's inability is less extreme, but it seems acute from the start, as he has for some reason been unable to finish his copy of an important contract for Mr. Alleyne, who accuses him right off of having "always some excuse or another for shirking work" (87). Farrington too would prefer not to; and he doesn't, sort of. He may not have the absolute courage of his convictions we see all too present in Bartleby, but in this pivotal matter he is his counterpart.

And indeed they are genuine "counterparts." Above all they are so to each other, but they are also counterparts to secondary figures in their respective stories. If we had any doubts about that in Joyce's story, the title makes it clear enough, with a near explicitness in which Joyce rarely indulges, except—as here—in some of his titles
Farrington the Scrivener

(A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Exiles, Ulysses, Finnegans Wake). Farrington is played off against Mr. Alleyne; against Weathers, the young man who beats him at arm wrestling (and who has apparently slipped out from work in order to join them at the pub); and most compellingly against his young son, Tom. The counterpointing is so close and so effective that even in the short space of this brief tale we come to understand that, at least in respect to Mr. Alleyne and Tom, it is not a question of their merely being "foils" for Farrington: they are in fact his counterparts, his doubles or "doppelgangers."

As a number of critics have shown, "Bartleby the Scrivener" is also a tale of doubles, with its major and minor characters serving as "counterparts" to one another: above all, the lawyer and Bartleby; but also the other two scriveners, Nippers and Turkey (mirroring one another like the morning and afternoon personalities of a single character—the nip and tuck, as it were); and the lawyer and each of those two characters (especially the elder, Turkey); as well as those scriveners (and, perhaps, Ginger Nut) and Bartleby. It is one thing to recognize that all these characters are doubles, however, and quite another to perceive the full significance of their doubling in this mysterious tale. An especially crucial area of exploration is the relationship each scrivener has with his employer/double.

Joyce's Mr. Alleyne, as we have seen, is petulant and in general apparently a hard, irritable man to work for. In the first sentence of the story he rings the bell "furiously," and speaks through the tube in "a furious voice" and in "a piercing" accent (86). In contrast, Melville's lawyer is apparently justified in claiming at the start that "I seldom lose my temper" (93). Yet he finds Bartleby's behavior so provoking that he responds at times in ways that, by his standards in any case, come quite close to the mode of response of Mr. Alleyne: at first he merely reports his "rising in high excitement," but he soon enough finds himself speaking "in a louder tone"—indeed "'Bartleby,' I roared"; and "sometimes, to be sure, I could not, for the very soul of me, avoid falling into sudden spasmodic passions with him" (101, 106, 107).

The two employees, however, are portrayed as powerless—impotent—in their respective spheres. Bartleby manifests impotence through passivity (although through passive resistance), Farrington through impotent rage. But in each their sense of powerlessness and alienation seems exacerbated by the contrasts between themselves and
their employers—and their employers’ positions in the world. Bartleby shares the traits his employer ascribes to himself: he too wants a “snug retreat” and acts—with a vengeance—as though he has a “profound conviction that the easiest way of life is best” (92–93). But within the social world of the story—given, that is the socio-political and economic forces at work—the lawyer can convert these traits into success, authority, and power, while for Bartleby they are self-destructive.

Both Bartleby and Farrington live and work in a system in which they cannot succeed. Bartleby’s “passive resistance” occurs in a society far removed from Thoreau’s; or, more accurately, given his class, his social status, and the economic realities of his situation—all of them more comparable to Farrington’s than Thoreau’s—there is no possibility of Bartleby attaining some genuine mode of triumph or success through such passive resistance.

Farrington clearly envies his employer’s potent, active rage and energy, manifested in an ability to fire Farrington or to see that “his life would be a hell to him” (92). Mr. Alleyne’s forcefulness has an outlet that society sanctions; Farrington’s only outlets—or so it would seem to him—are through drink and abusing his son. But, as with Bartleby, his mode of behavior is self-destructive.

In Melville’s story, all that does not make us lose sight of how the lawyer takes on a positively fatherly role in regard to his young employee—just as, perhaps, it is a similar recognition of their paternal relationship that leads Bartleby in his turn to choose the lawyer for his own needs. Those needs, as much of what I have said would suggest, seem at least twofold: for one thing, to involve a young man’s need for a father, but for another to include a son’s presumably inevitable need to rebel against that father. Moreover, the lawyer seems more or less to recognize his role in such a pattern, and the necessity for it. At one point, he even suggests that his own needs are thereby being met, when he says in regard to Bartleby’s actions that “I burned to be rebelled against again” (106). In the end, he goes so far as to offer to bring Bartleby into his own home—to adopt him, in effect. But Bartleby would prefer not to.

Paternal benevolence is not enough, nor is mere kindness. Bartleby’s employer is much more humane than Farrington’s (or, as I have argued, than most employers would ever be), but that does not save Bartleby, and it would not save Farrington either.
The paternity theme in "Counterparts" is illuminated if complicated by the fact that in portraying and naming Mr. Alleyne, Joyce is—as a loyal son—paying off one of "his father's scores," as Richard Ellmann puts it (16); for a Henry Alleyn was a dishonest businessman and supervisor of a firm with which the older Joyce had worked, and he had run off with the firm's funds. But Farrington himself, unlike Bartleby (we can only assume), is also a father, not merely a son: in that context, the biographical associations are complicated by the fact that Farrington seems at least partially based on Joyce's father, John Joyce, as well as on Joyce's uncle, William Murray. According to Stanislaus Joyce in an entry in his diary during 1904, "the manner in which Uncle Willie tyrannizes his children is to me an intolerable and stupid cowardice," and Stanislaus goes on to report that "on one occasion Bertie, then an infant of six or seven, begged Uncle William not to beat him and promised to say a 'Hail Mary' for him if he didn't" (37). Stanislaus' attitude toward such brutality is commendable, but it is one of my arguments that James Joyce's presentation, while no less damning, also brings us closer to a genuine understanding, even a degree of compassion, for Uncle William's counterpart. As Joyce once wrote in a letter to Stanislaus, "if many husbands are brutal the atmosphere in which they live (vide Counterparts) is brutal..." (Letters II 192).

Intriguingly, the authors of both stories use similar imagery in evoking the anguish and situations of their scriveners. Bartleby's story is a "Story of Wall Street," and he is constantly associated with walls, particularly "the dead brick wall" upon which his office window looks (111); at the Tombs he at last dies "strangely huddled at the base of the wall" (130). Farrington is "tall and of great bulk," and Mr. Alleyne claims that "I might as well be talking to the wall as talking to you" (86, 87). And Farrington (we are told several times) has "heavy dirty eyes" (94; cf. 86), while Bartleby, at death, has "dim eyes" (130).

In a well-known letter of 1904 to Constantine P Curran, Joyce said that he was calling his book "Dubliners to betray the soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city" (Letters I 55); two years later he reiterated, to Grant Richards, that "I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis" (Letters II 134). If anything, the sense of paralysis is even greater in Bartleby's tale than in Farrington's, for Bartleby is for all
practical purposes quite literally paralyzed and static—even to the degree of seeming at last catatonic. He displays “great stillness,” and “long-continued motionlessness” (107, 111); the mildness and stasis with which he utters his “I would prefer not to” portray not action but inaction, and a preference for it; he goes nowhere—“I like to be stationary”—and finally the lawyer is the one who is forced to move, since Bartleby does not and will not.

Farrington would seem to be constantly active, yet the effect is often curiously similar. Confronted with Mr. Alleyne’s anger at his not yet having done his copying at the start of the story, Farrington remains in front of his employer’s desk, immobile, until at last Mr. Alleyne bursts out, “Are you going to stand there all day?” Returning to his desk, and despite the urgency of his need to get down to work, or because of it, Farrington is paralyzed with an inability to copy even a single word: “he continued to stare stupidly at the last words he had written” (88). At the end of his evening’s pub crawl, this clerk who has longed to leave his office “loathed returning to his home” (97), so that Bernard Benstock’s phrasing is right on the mark when he observes that Farrington “moves from pub to pub until time and money run out and he is fixed in a catatonic moment of entrapment” (35).

The social context of each story brings out the stasis and paralysis on the communal level; both men are paralyzed by the worlds in which they live. Their resulting immobility and inertia are personally ruinous and seemingly irrational, as are, in context, the comments each makes to his employer which bring on the respective crises. Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” makes no ordinary “sense” at all. And for his part Farrington’s reply to Mr. Alleyne’s demand that he answer the question about whether he takes him for a fool—that, in effect, he would prefer not to (“I don’t think, sir, he said, that that’s a fair question to put to me” [91])—is similarly disastrous. It is precisely equivalent to Bartleby’s answer at one point in his story: “‘At present I prefer to give no answer,’ he said.” (113).

It is essential to understand the significance of the closeness of their responses, which are in substance interchangeable. For in each case the behavior of the given scrivener is to himself not as outrageous, as incomprehensible or as irrational, as it will necessarily seem to the rest of the world. It is a mode of coping. Even perhaps a strategy, a tactic. Their action and inaction seem to them the only means they have to handle what they regard as an unlivable situation.
Bartleby's behavior is clearly ludicrous, absurd, even sick, if you are not Bartleby; Farrington's behavior is clearly crude, brutal, even cruel, certainly indefensible, if you are anyone else in the world except Farrington. "At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable," says Bartleby for both of them (113).

The ultimate point of the comparisons I have discussed, after all, is to attempt to illuminate what happens in both stories, and why—or out of what forces. I feel especially that the comparisons help us to comprehend "Counterparts" more fully. Bartleby certainly remains a mysterious figure, and any attempt to explain completely—or to explain away—his motivation, or the sources in his psyche for what he does, is doomed to failure. There are ambiguities enough in Joyce's story, but for once another writer seems even more indeterminate than he. Yet however uncertain we remain about the true sources of Bartleby's behavior and his plight, we must—given the comparisons I have pointed out—feel that at least some may well be shared with Farrington: and among those their frustration and alienation and social plight are surely central. And for my present purposes, it is Farrington's character which is particularly illuminated in this light, for the comparison enables us to see him from a perspective that grants us a greater receptivity to compassion for this fierce and ill-natured man with a wasted life. We become his as well as Bartleby's counterparts.

Ah, Farrington! Ah, humanity!

NOTES

1. I have argued elsewhere against the frequent assertion that it is the lawyer, rather than Bartleby, who is for most readers the central interest in Melville's story. In that same essay, I pursue the relevance of "schizophrenia" as a clinical term in attempting to comprehend Bartleby, his state, and his behavior. See "Bartleby and Schizophrenia."

2. See for example the works cited for Marcus, Widmer, Rogers, Keppler, and Beja.

WORKS CITED


