

Prudence and Method

Errands of Life Speeding to Death:
A Story of Bartleby's Wall Street.

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About forty years ago, I confessed to one of my first writing mentors, a multi-artist named Gladys Swan, that I could seldom answer the questions college texts posed at the end of a short story. "Neither can I," she responded. Decades later, writing this essay, I remembered thinking maybe she only wanted to make me feel better, and I wrote to her; she remembered the incident, and we still agreed, enjoying an enhanced sense of fellowship from the mutual confession.

In college textbooks, the editors often follow monumental stories with questions that leave me infuriated, trying to debate with the unresponsive page: "Discuss fully the meaning of Bartleby's *preference*," R.V. Cassill, for example, asks after Melville's story in *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*.

What do you mean by *meaning*, Verl?

Or "What is the matter with Bartleby?" Professor Charles E. May asks after the story in his anthology *Fiction's Many Worlds*.

With submission, Professor May, what do you mean by “the matter with”?

May, by the way, includes this story under the section “The World of Fable, Legend, Allegory and Myth,” as opposed to “The World of Reality,” “The World of Dream and Hallucination,” or “The World of Story,” and he prints the fiction under the mononame title of “Bartleby” and not “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” and leaving off the subtitle “A Story of Wall Street,” which, to my mind, matters greatly. (An arresting case has been made by at least one critic for Wall Street as the Hellenistic tombs of Petra in Palestine and a metaphor, as Lewis Mumford says, for “the pervasive prison of dull routine and meaningless activity.” One poster in the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 depicted a hamster before a treadmill headlined with Bartleby’s signature words, “I WOULD PREFER NOT TO.”)

Cassill asks six questions; Michael Meyer in *The Bedford Introduction to Literature* poses 14 suggested considerations and questions and includes two critical statements on “Bartleby,” one by Hawthorne and one by critic Dan McCall, after each of which Meyer asks, respectively, four and three questions. Lionel Trilling in his *The Experience of Literature* includes a three-page commentary, which comes closest, I think, to the essence of Melville’s story. Professor May, again, asks five questions following the story, each presumably meant to be a door to meaning, but each of which made me feel stupider and increasingly recalcitrant.

“Consider the possibility that Bartleby arrives to effect a change in the narrator,” Professor May suggests. Which immediately evoked my thought: I would prefer *not* to consider that because Bartleby doesn’t actually effect a change in the narrator. He does change his place of business, but not his basic master-servant relationship, exploiting his employees at four cents per hundred words. (I discuss Professor May’s suggestion further, below.)

I have a secret: I have the *Instructor's Guide*, which Charles E. May devised for *Fiction's Many Worlds*, so that the instructors do not have to wallow around in ignorant uncertainty. Maybe I can—by raking my fingernails over the mosquito bites of the questions—secretly look at the answers to those five questions and be done with it. I could know, once and for all, the meaning of “Bartleby.”

However, I am disappointed. To a 30-page story written 162 years ago, Charles May's *Instructor's Guide* includes a mere page of text, which, though thought-provoking, does not provide answers to those five questions. Are answers to be found? As Bartleby's co-worker Turkey in the story might say, “With submission, sir,” allow me to turn back to the story itself, pinching ideas and thoughts from the literature along the way.

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