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Satoshi Koma

In his lecture on Roman Statuary Melville makes the following reference to the forgery of a correspondence between Paul and Seneca which was known to Jerome:

In the bust of Seneca, whose philosophy would be Christianity itself save its authenticity, whose utterances so amazed one of the early fathers that he thought he must have corresponded with St. Paul, we see a face more like that of a disappointed pawnbroker, pinched and grieved. His resemblance is just, for it was known that he was avaricious and grasping, and dealt largely in mortgages and loans, and drove hard bargains even at that day. It is ironlike and inflexible, and would be no disgrace to a Wall Street broker.¹

Only the bronze bust of Seneca struck Melville as being a "caricature."² But what "these statues confess and, as it were, prattle to us of" is not recorded in history. Melville finds in them evidence of unchanging quality of what goes to make up "the component parts of human character." And he hopes that the "heroic tone peculiar to ancient life" is "not wholly lost from the world, although the earthly vanity inculcated by Christianity may have swallowed it up in humility."³

To decry wealth and praise poverty is to some extent a commonplace; and with Seneca in particular this was so frequent a practice (Ep. 17. 3) that his hearers found some inconsistency between his words and his deeds; for he was a rich man. But his position is clear: that "riches are a good" is a Stoic paradox (Ep. 87. 35; V.B. 24. 5); but nevertheless they are an advantage, and thus are rightly aimed at

(V.B. 24. 6). The maintenance of the family property was a duty of high importance; and the wasting of it in wholesale largess, a serious misdeed (Ep. 120. 8). The Stoic view was sufficiently summed up in a proverb borrowed from Epicurus or one of his followers: "he who feels the need of wealth least, can make the best use of it" (Ep. 14. 17). For Seneca Nero's favor was a danger. But one should not of course read in his writings his mere "hidden and unvoiced apologies."⁴ Rather, we should read in them his actions of performing the parts, and even the opposite ones, in a play he had chosen. Seneca holds fast to the principles that virtue can be taught and that virtue is an art. For "nature does not bestow virtue; it is an art to become good." "Virtue is not vouchsafed to a soul unless that soul has been trained and taught, and by unremitting practice brought to perfection" (Ep. 90. 44, 46). Seneca himself does not claim to be a wise man (Ep. 57. 3). But nobody can be "one person except the wise man; the rest of us often shifts our masks. At times you will think us thrifty and serious, at other times wasteful and idle. We continually change our characters and play a part contrary to that which we have discarded. You should therefore force yourself to maintain to the very end of life's drama the character which you assumed at the beginning. See to it that men be able to praise you; if not, let them at least identify you" (Ep. 120. 22). The lawyer-narrator and his two scribes nicknamed Turkey and Nippers in "Bartleby" are characters of this kind: "a man [is] never the same, never even like himself; to such an extent does he wander off into opposites" (v. 21).

Expecting the Messianic "advant of Bartleby,"⁵ the law office already produces the atmosphere of a church: "the light came down from far above, ... as from a very small opening in a dome" (p. 23). Turkey makes blots on his copy after the sun has reached its meridian. "Though the civilest, nay, the blandest and most reverential of men in the morning, yet, in the afternoon, [he] was disposed ... to be ... insolent" (p. 19). "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful;

it is not arrogant or rude. Love ... is not irritable. ... Love bears all things" (1 Cor. 13. 4-7); "Through love be servants of one another" (Gal. 5. 13); "Love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12. 10); "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves" (Phil. 2. 3). By contrast Nippers "was, at least, a temperate young man." He is continually discontented with the table where he works. His antemeridian work is torn by irritation, fighting his desk as if it "were a perverse voluntary agent, intent on thwarting and vexing him." The irritability and nervousness of Nippers are "mainly observable in the morning, while in the afternoon he was comparatively mild" (pp. 21, 22). "Walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desire of the flesh. ... Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, ... that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5. 16, 19-23). It is a habit with Turkey and Nippers to send the office boy Ginger Nut for "that peculiar cake ... small, flat, round, and very spicy." Turkey one afternoon moistens a ginger cake between his lips, and claps it on to a mortgage "for a seal" (p. 22). Such is the meaning of Christ's life-giving body in the story. "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give you; for on him has God the Father set his seal" (John 6. 27). Bartleby turns out to eat nothing else than ginger-nuts. "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work" (John 4. 34). Turkey and Nippers respectively spend half a day in imitating of Christ and the new scrivener Bartleby a whole day. But he will not examine copies, even for the lawyer, saying, "I would prefer not to" (pp. 24, 25). When he says so, he probably has in mind Mat. 6. 24: "No one can serve two masters."

Into the mouth of the lawyer does Melville put his own feelings: "Had there been any thing ordinarily human about him," he should have instantly dismissed him (p. 25). Seneca, Melville's favorite, also testifies that "When we see a person of such steadfastness, how can we help being conscious of the image of a nature so unusual?" (Ep. 120. 19) At first Bartleby does an "extraordinary" amount of work, "copying by sun-light and by candle-light" (p. 24). "We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work" (John 9. 4). Bartleby refuses to examine copies as usual, but the lawyer cannot dismiss him. For there is something about him that "not only *strangely* disarmed me, but, in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me" (p. 26 *my italics*). Jesus says, "All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out" (John 6. 37). But when he once "prefers not to,"

"Very good, Bartleby" said I, ... intimating the unalterable purpose of some terrible retribution very close at hand. ... "I prefer not to" was sure to come; and then, how could a human creature, with the common infirmities of our nature, refrain from bitterly exclaiming upon such perverseness—such unreasonableness. [pp. 30–31]

(Here "bitterly" means "in a hostile manner") When Jesus preaches against retribution and enmity in the Sermon on the Mount, he says, "Love your enemies" (Mat. 5. 44). And when it reminds the lawyer that "If while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, ..." (Rom. 5. 10), the lawyer becomes "reconciled to Bartleby" (pp. 30–31). But the lawyer resolves that he will dismiss him, thinking to himself that "if ... I could assist him, I would be happy to do so, especially if he desired to return to his native place, wherever that might be, I would willingly help to defray the expenses" (p. 35). Jesus says, "In my Father's house are many rooms; ... I go to prepare a place for you. And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you

may be also" (John 14. 2, 3). The lawyer tries to dismiss Bartleby but in vain. The lawyer "*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" (p. 36 my italics). Christ "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil. 2. 7). Indeed, Bartleby's personal belongings are very small in number: "A blanket," "a blacking box and brush," "a tin basin with soap and ragged towel," and "a few crumbs of ginger-nuts in a newspaper." "His poverty was great" (p. 33). "Though [Christ] was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8. 9). Bartleby at last announces that he has "decided upon doing no more working." "And what is the reason?" demands the lawyer. "Do you not see the reason for yourself?" Bartleby replies (p. 38). Jesus says, "Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee, ... I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do" (John 17. 1, 4). The lawyer, actually aware that Bartleby is prepared to suffer his passion, takes upon himself the part of Pilate. "I see it, I feel it," he says. "I am content. Others may have loftier parts to enact; but my mission in this world, Bartleby, is to furnish you with office-room for such period as you may see fit to remain" (p. 44). Accordingly, he deserts Bartleby. He denies him thus: "I am very sorry, sir, ... but, really, the man you allude to is nothing to me. ... Bartleby [is] nothing to me. ... I [am] the last person known to have anything to do with him" (pp. 47-48). Pilate's wife warns him to have nothing to do with "that righteous man," about whom she has had a dream; also the hand-washing incident is introduced, in which Pilate claims to his own innocence (Mat. 27. 19, 24). Here it deserves to be remembered that the lawyer, though denying Bartleby in the morning, yet, in the afternoon, invites him into the house, asking, "Bartleby, ... will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my dwelling?" (p. 49) Jesus says, "I was a stranger and

ye took me in" (Mat. 25. 35 KJ). Following the example of Turkey and Nippers, the lawyer imitates Christ, and then resumes the role of Pilate and visits to befriend Bartleby in the Tombs prison, and says, "It was not I that brought you here" (p. 51). A world arises of parodies of passages in the Bible according as Bartleby imitates Christ.

The description of Bartleby throughout the story is shadowed by the image of Jesus' death: "his cadaverously gentlemanly nonchalance" (p. 32); "the pallid copyist" (p. 33); "pallid haughtiness" (p. 34); "his cadaverous reply" (p. 36); "his cadaverous triumph" (p. 42); "his innocent pallor" (p. 46); "a pallid hopelessness" (p. 54). Bartleby, as it were, is "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus" (2 Cor. 4. 10). There is a rumor to the effect that he "had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington" (p. 54). The lawyer comments:

Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters and assorting them for the flames? [p. 54]

Yet an examination of Bartleby's actions prove the contrary when seen in the light of the course of the salvation-occurrence. On the contrary, Bartleby believes Christ to be "the hope of glory" (Col. 1. 27). The interpretation of Christian baptism is compared to Jesus' death and resurrection: "How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death. ... For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old man was crucified with [Christ] so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin" (Rom. 6. 2-6). Yet the lawyer's old man lives, and he is not

all crucified: "But when the old Adam of resentment rose in me and tempted me concerning Bartleby, I grappled him and threw him" (p. 43). "The bond of a common humanity" draws the lawyer to Bartleby. "A fraternal melancholy!" he says. "For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam" (p. 33). But when the lawyer confesses that "I never feel so private as when I know you are here" (p. 44), Bartleby probably reminds him of Rom. 6. 8: "If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him."

But there is nothing available but "faith working through love" (Gal. 5. 6). By accident, one Sunday morning, when he "happened" to go to church, the lawyer discovers, on attempting to enter his office, that Bartleby works for him. He is perplexed, for "whatever might be his eccentricities, Bartleby was an eminently decorous person. ... Beside, it was Sunday; and there was something about Bartleby that forbade the supposition that he would by any secular occupation violate the proprieties of the day" (p. 32). A moment later, the lawyer is repulsed by the sight of Bartleby's "miserable friendlessness and loneliness." He promptly disavows his Sunday sentiments:

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. So true it is, and so terrible, too, that up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but, in certain special cases, beyond that point it does not. ... And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul be rid of it. [pp. 34-35]

Thus the things he saw "disqualified" him from church-going. For this reason: "Faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13. 13). The next morning, the lawyer calls Bartleby, and says:

“Will you tell me anything about yourself?”

“I would prefer not to.”

“But what reasonable objection can you have to speak to me? I feel friendly toward you.”

... ..

“Bartleby, never mind, then, about revealing your history; but let me entreat you, *as a friend*, to comply as far as may be with the usages of this office. Say now, you will help to examine papers tomorrow or next day. [p. 36 my italics]

For the lawyer Bartleby is like

one who ... will be satisfactory only so long as he is useful. Hence prosperous men are blockaded by troops of friends; but those who have failed stand amid vast loneliness, their friends fleeing from the very crisis which is to test their worth. Hence, also, we notice those many shameful cases of persons who, through fear; desert or betray. The beginning and the end cannot but harmonize. He who begins to be your friend because it pays will also cease because it pays. [Ep. 9. 9]

The lawyer says one and the same thing: “He is useful to me. I can get along with him. ... To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange willfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience” (p. 28). While we can well understand the meaning of his desertion, we cannot expect him to agree that “There is no fear in love,” nor that “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends,” nor that “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, *who loved me and gave himself for me*” (1 John 4. 18; John 15. 13; Gal. 2. 20 my italics). Yet the lawyer as a Christian “tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of” (p. 47).

There still remains, however, the question of incarnation of Christ. "Bartleby was," says the lawyer, "one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, *except from the original sources*, and, in his case, those are very small" (p. 16 my italics). Jesus says, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8. 58). Bartleby declines "telling who he was, or whence he came, or whether he had any relatives in the world" (p. 34); he asks, "will you tell me, Bartleby, where you were born?" (p. 35); and he confides that "If he would but have named a single relative or friend, I would instantly have written" (p. 39). But Bartleby never speaks. Jesus says, "I told you, and you do not believe" (John 10. 25). The lawyer discovers that Bartleby has quietly occupied his office, to eat and sleep there. He thinks, "His solitude, how terrible!" (p. 33) Jesus says of himself, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3. 16); "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world. ... In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son" (1 John 4. 9-10). Christ, according to his pre-existence, is also described as "the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1. 24). The lawyer once saves himself from a possibly murderous rage "by recalling the divine injunction: 'A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.' ... *Aside from higher considerations*, charity often operates as a vastly *wise and prudent* principle—a great safeguard to its possessor" (p. 43 my italics). The lawyer himself admits that his wisdom is "an art of living" (Ep. 95. 7). "Be not wise in your conceits" (Rom. 12. 16 KJ). And the humanity of Jesus can be denied less than his pre-existence: "Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God" (1 John 4. 2-3). The lawyer finds Bartleby dead, lying in the prison yard. Like an unborn child, he is "strangely huddled ... with his knees drawn up, and lying on his side" (p. 53). "Eh!—He's asleep, ain't he?" asks a functionary. "With kings and counsellors," answers the lawyer (Job 3. 14). What is meant by his allusion to Job

is plain: that *Bartleby* had better not have been born,—or in other words, that “The greatest test was still before Him: His life as a man on earth.”⁶ Why is it that he did not die happily? Because he was honest, indeed, too honest. The lawyer says, “I had a *singular* confidence in his honesty” (p. 31 my italics). The term of “dead letters” is quoted from Rom. 7. 6: “Now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of letter” (KJ). The commandment was once given to Paul for life, but it nevertheless led him to death; it did so by arousing desire in him. “Apart from the law sin lies dead” (v. 9). On the other hand, “to those under the law,” says he, “I became as one under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law” (1 Cor. 9. 20). He saw even in himself a possibility, indeed, of imitation of evil, but such is not what concerns *Bartleby*. “A servant [is not] above his master” (Mat. 10. 24).

(Notes)

- 1 Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Melville as Lecturer* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 132–133.
- 2 Herman Melville, *Journals* (Evanston and Chicago: North-Western University Press, 1989), p.103.
- 3 *Melville as Lecturer*, pp.134, 135.
- 4 J. N. Sevenster, *Paul and Seneca* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961), p.203. I owe much in writing this paragraph to *Paul and Seneca*, pp.200–207, and E. Vernon Arnold, *Roman Stoicism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1958), pp.320–321.
- 5 *The Piazza Tales* (New York: Hendricks House, 1948), p.17. Subsequent page references are to this edition.
- 6 D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix II* (London: Heineman, 1968), p.574.