“Bartleby,” Melville’s first story,1 written in the year after *Pierre,* has become more and more Melville’s representative work: partly because of the difficulty of anthologizing the longer works (coupled, perhaps, with a reluctance to cope with their complexities in a survey course); and partly because “Bartleby,” which anticipates the works of Kafka and others, seems so modern (hence, teachable?).

One notable consequence of this constant republication has been a parallel growth of critical interpretations of “Bartleby.” These commentaries fall into three general categories. First, there are those traditional kinds of treatment in which literary historians search for actual identities. This practice was clearly enunciated in the earliest reviews. In both the *Berkshire County Eagle* and *The Criterion,* reviewers of *The Piazza Tales* indicated that “Bartleby” is “a portrait from life” which was “based upon living characters.”2 These suggestions are annoyingly vague, however, inasmuch as they make no specific identifications. In more recent times, Bartleby’s condition has been viewed as having originated in “an external contemporary source, namely, Thoreau’s withdrawal from society.”3 This idea has taken hold of many critical imaginations. So we find even the most recent critic of “Bartleby” referring to the central character as “a melancholy Thoreau.”4 Other more immediate personalities upon whose lives Melville may have based this story have also been put forward. Leyda has suggested that “The figure of Bartleby himself, no matter how wider his true significance, may have been drawn from the most intimate friendship of his early maturity—With Eli James Murdoch Fly, whom he could have first met either at the Albany Academy or during Fly’s five-year apprenticeship in the law office of Peter Gansevoort, Melville’s uncle. In the fall of 1840 they together went to New York looking for work: . . . Fly remained in New York to take ‘a situation with a Mr Edwards, where he has incessant writing from morning to noon.’”5 Fly reappears, in a letter from Melville to Evert Duyckinck: ‘He has long been a confirmed invalid, & in some small things I act a little as his agent.’6 A third candidate has been resurrected by Leon Howard in his biography of Melville. “The story,” writes Howard, “was supposedly based upon a certain amount of fact, and the fact may have been either some anecdote concerning a lawyer’s clerk or the unfortunate condition of Melville’s friend Adler, who had developed such a severe case of agoraphobia that he was to be confined in the Bloomingdale Asylum.”7

A more persistent and provocative identification of Bartleby, however, has been with Melville himself. As early as 1929, Lewis Mumford asserted this position: “Bartleby,” he maintained, “affords us a glimpse of Melville’s own drift of mind in this miserable year [1853]: the point of the story plainly indicates Melville’s present dilemma.”8 Other critics have almost unanimously shared this point of view. Typical is this comment some twenty-five years later: “There are excellent reasons for reading ‘Bartleby’ as a parable having to do with Melville’s own fate as a writer.”9 This inter-

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interpretation has in turn been expanded to include the notion that Bartleby represents not just Melville but the nineteenth-century American artist in conflict with his environment. Perhaps the most elaborate autobiographical reading of the story is that by Willard Thorp, who viewed Melville’s “new kind of writing” (for magazines like Harper’s and Putnam’s) as resembling that of his lawyer, “dull business but (possibly) profitable.” Melville, continues Thorp, was “of three minds about it. Like Turkey he can keep at it until noon. Like Nippers he can be steady enough until his ambition gets the upper hand. In the character of Bartleby Melville prefigures what this new life may ultimately come to. Will its trivialities, the conventional nature of his task, impel him to follow the lonely scrivener’s decision to ‘copy’ no more?”

A third approach to the story, occasionally implicit in the other two, has been the aesthetic, which can be described as the attempt to understand the piece as a work of art. Mumford prefaced his comments with the simple assertion that “Bartleby” is “a good story in itself.” F. O. Matthiessen, in his distinguished study, American Renaissance, referred to the story as “a tragedy of utter negation, of the enduring hopelessness of a young man who is absolutely alone, ‘a bit of wreck in the mid-Atlantic,’ which is New York.” Later critics have strained themselves a bit more in their efforts to analyze the work. The most frequent label applied in recent years has been “parable,” and the key words to describe Melville’s method, “irony” and “symbolism.” A few examples from the many will serve. Richard Chase refers to “a profounder level of symbolic meaning in Bartleby.” Now, he maintains, “we have indeed once more come upon Melville’s central theme: the relation between the father and the son [symbolically, the lawyer and Bartleby] and their failure or success in achieving the atonement, in redeeming each other.” Newton Arvin goes one level better: “There is a level on which ‘Bartleby’ can be described as a wonderfully intuitive study in what would today be called schizophrenia. . . . What Bartleby essentially dramatizes is not the pathos of dementia praecox but the bitter metaphysical pathos of the human situation itself; the cosmic irony of the truth that men are at once immititigably interdependent and immititigably forlorn.” Finally, the analysis of Richard Fogle, previously referred to, makes the claim that “Bartleby” is “a story of absolutism, predestination, and free will, in which predestination undoubtedly predominates.”

All three of these approaches, particularly the interpretative, substantially reinforce the impression that “Bartleby” is indeed a rich and rewarding work. But it is curious how little these critics have been concerned to attempt any analysis of the story in terms of form. Only Marx has mentioned structure. He indicates (p. 608) that the narrative “takes place in three consecutive movements: Bartleby’s gradually stiffening resistance to the Wall Street routine, then a series of attempts by the lawyer to enforce the scrivener’s conformity and, finally, society’s punishment of the recalcitrant writer.”

I would like to offer here a more extensive investigation of the organization of the tale. First of all, we must keep in mind that this is a first-person narrative and, although the story is about Bartleby, we know him and come to understand his situation through the eyes and words of the lawyer who employs him. The story appropriately begins with “I . . . a rather elderly man”; it concludes with a comment, set off by itself, a kind of universal sigh, uttered by no one, addressed not even to “the reader”:

Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!

The story, I submit, is not Bartleby’s, but, on the first level, the lawyer’s; secondly, it is the reader’s, for as the lawyer learns

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3Richard Chase, Herman Melville, A Critical Study (1949), pp. 147-8.

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3By no means do these few references exhaust the number of published works which have interpreted or explained “Bartleby.” One must consult the Melville section (pp. 207-270) of Eight American Authors, edited by Floyd Stovall (1956), the entries under Melville in Contemporary Literary Scholarship, edited by Lewis Leary (1958), as well as continuing bibliographies in PMLA and other journals.
so must the reader. The fact that both the lawyer and the reader do learn is, then, communicated by means of this final chorus, appropriately a paragraph to itself, unadorned except for the exclamation marks which emphasize the awful awareness contained in the expression itself.

Marx is correct, I believe, in his notion that the story develops in three movements. But I should like to suggest a different triad. The opening section of the story does not center about Bartleby, except indirectly. It introduces, first of all, the lawyer, who makes it clear that his procedure throughout will be absolutely in character, for even "the late John Jacob Astor . . . had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method." The story, then, will be unfolded cautiously and methodically. Almost immediately we meet "first, Turkey; second, Nippers; third, Ginger Nut." And we notice at once that the lawyer is nameless; the employees have nicknames; for Bartleby alone is a true name reserved. Only after the eccentricities of the lawyer and the employees have been fully revealed is Bartleby introduced:

In answer to my advertisement, a motionless young man one morning stood upon my office threshold, the door being open, for it was summer. I can see that figure now—pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby.

The middle third of the story deals with subsequent happenings in the law office, in particular with the lawyer-scrivener relationship. This longest section of the narrative can in turn be divided into three segments. It begins "on the third day" of Bartleby's employment. Called upon "to examine a small paper," Bartleby, "in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, 'I would prefer not to.'" Thus Bartleby poses the first problem. (We must note that he is not being whimsical; his behavior is eccentric but, as is the case with the other characters, it is absolute; he acts on the basis of "some paramount consideration.") Bartleby's actions provoke the lawyer's first response: selfish acceptance. "Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval," he writes; after all, Bartleby's "steadiness, his freedom from all dissipation, his incessant industry . . . his great stillness, his unalterableness of demeanor under all circumstances, made him a valuable acquisition." He was, in truth, no more difficult than Turkey or Nippers.

But now Bartleby poses a second problem: the lawyer discovers that his scrivener has been living at the office. (Here, again, we must note that Bartleby's eccentricity is a matter of degree: the others eat ginger-nut cakes whereas Bartleby consumes only these spicy tid-bits and some cheese; the others spend their days in the office, but here Bartleby "makes his home" never even going out for a walk.) "What miserable friendliness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible!" Bartleby's state forces a new response from the lawyer: pity. It is significant that the lawyer does not simply feel sorry for his clerk; he can as well pity himself: "A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam." The upshot of his discovery and the violence of his reactions prevent him from going to church. (There is no answer in formal religion?)

The third problem which Bartleby poses now emerges: he gives up copying. He has become "a millstone." And the lawyer's response? The perfect Christian reaction: charity. The lawyer, after a variety of excuses and plans, simply recalls "the divine injunction: 'A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.'" Thus the middle section of the tale is brought to a close. The lawyer concludes with Job-like resignation that "these troubles . . . had been all predestined 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."

In 1853, in the publication of "Bartleby" in two parts in Putnam's Magazine, the break between the two installments occurred after Bartleby's announcement that he had given up copying and after the employer's decision to try to cope with this situation. The actual stopping place was the moment when the lawyer, having left Bartleby a generous amount of money, having requested him to leave the key under the mat, departs his office, "charmed" with the "beauty" of his handling of the matter. This is a dramatic high point in the narrative, of a kind to excite readers' curiosity: will Bar-
tleby leave the premises? But it is not the philosophic and structural climax of the story, which takes place a bit later, after the lawyer's acceptance of the situation.

But now we must move to the concluding section of the story: society enters, in the persons of the lawyer's "professional friends" and other visitors. They are the first; they force the lawyer to desert his chambers, his principles, and Bartleby. New "tenants" now add their complaints. Finally, the landlord sends for the police, who remove Bartleby to the Tombs. Here there are more social beings: "murderers and thieves," the "grub-man," several "turn-keys." The final section of the narrative truly enlarges the implications. As long as relationships were on a personal, one-to-one basis (as was true also of the employer's attitude toward Turkey and Nippers) the lawyer could, and did, behave as a Christian. But once the situation was allowed to go further, was invaded by others, new considerations arose. In this third section, the role of the lawyer subtly changes: he is no longer an involved character; he has become simply the narrator. Society has become involved; it has taken over the lawyer's role. But society has no method, no way of coping with the issues Bartleby raises. It can resort only to its one effective institution, the jail, ironically named the Tombs. There, Bartleby dies, to join others like himself, "kings and counselors." At last, he can absolutely be identified with a society.

It is significant that Melville added a kind of postscript to this story: the lawyer's divulgence of "one little item of rumor." The information, "that Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in the administration," merely confirms our previous point; it adds a specific political dimension to the social one, but it in no way diminishes the central point, that society must be responsible. The "charity" or "pardon," the "hope" or "good tidings" which those dead letters contained are all useless, too late. Indeed, only a choral comment could end this story. Any personal remark would be inadequate and artistically out of key.

JAMES'S "THE REAL THING": THREE LEVELS OF MEANING

Earle Labor

Despite its popularity in the classroom (it is perhaps the most anthologized of all Henry James's stories), "The Real Thing" continues to be read as a little masterpiece which, according to Clifton Fadiman, "expresses amusingly (and no more than that) the old truth that art is a transformation of reality, not a mere reflection of the thing itself." Without commenting upon Mr. Fadiman's curious sense of humor, I should like to demonstrate that James's theme—an "exquisite" question, as he put it—includes considerably "more than that."

It should be evident that, were the central meaning of "The Real Thing" no more than an esthetic cliché, the question that struck James's sensibility could hardly have been an exquisite one. An intelligence so fine