

Speaking with the “Tongues of Men and of Angels”: Addressing Human Conflict through Christian Charity in the Short Fiction of Herman Melville

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Abstract

The Apostle Paul articulates three of the central tenets of Christianity: “Now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity” (1 Cor. 13:13). Paul’s exhortation, with its emphasis on charity, may provide a key to ameliorating human strife today. But charity can assume many guises, sometimes exacerbating the very suffering it is designed to alleviate. Herman Melville addresses this paradox in two paired stories—“The Two Temples” and “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs”—and more poignantly in his tale “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” Juxtaposing a fashionable church in New York against a respectable theater in London, “The Two Temples” satirizes institutional religion and failed charity. Empty charity is also the focus of “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs” where an impoverished American couple prefer to starve rather than injure their pride, while a London mob mocks charity by fighting over scraps from the Lord Mayor’s banquet. In “Bartleby” the lawyer-narrator’s conscience impels him to assist his employee—with disastrous consequences, leaving both the narrator and the reader to ponder the merits of charity. This paper will consider the Christian dilemma these stories pose, as well as the ramifications on global conflict.

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A report from the 2007 Pew Global Attitudes Project notes that “in a world where the ties that bind are, in some ways, stronger than ever . . . the differences that divide are growing deeper. . . .”¹ The origins of such divisions—and of global religious conflict in particular—are complex, necessitating a multifaceted solution. Christianity teaches that one of the most effective ways to foster positive human relationships is through charity. In Corinthians, Apostle Paul articulates three of the central tenets of Christian belief: “Now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”² Paul maintains, “though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.”³ Paul’s exhortation may provide a key to ameliorating human strife in the world today, but charity can assume many guises, sometimes exacerbating the very suffering it is designed to alleviate. Herman Melville metaphorically addresses this paradox in his scathing satire *The Confidence-Man* but more directly in his short fiction, especially “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs,” “The Two Temples,” and “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street.”

Melville is unique among American writers of the nineteenth century in his treatment of charity, even though he is responding to a topic that generated widespread and intensive debate

¹“Information Initiatives: The Pew Global Attitudes Project (Pew Prospectus 2007),” *The Pew Charitable Trusts, Informing the Public: Public Opinion and Polls*, <http://www.pewtrusts.com> (accessed July 3, 2007).

²1 Cor. 13:13.

³1 Cor. 13:1.

as established attitudes and practices dating back to Jamestown and to John Winthrop's *A Modell of Christian Charity* were being supplanted by the theories of Social Darwinism and the hollow values that culminated in the "Gilded Age." In their study the *Cultural Dislocations of Disability*, Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell summarize the social climate: "The seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had tended to approach human differences from a religious standpoint of the 'strong' taking care of the 'weak.' In contrast, the nineteenth century approached dependency as a disservice to a nation that must invest in its manifest destiny."⁴ These shifting paradigms haunted Melville who grappled with faith and doubt. Despite his Calvinistic upbringing, Melville, as Nathaniel Hawthorne observed, could "neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief."⁵ The circumstances of Melville's family—from the proud legacy of his distinguished Revolutionary War grandfathers to the ignominy of his father's bankruptcy and subsequent death—further intensified Melville's sense of abandonment and what Robert Milder terms his "complicated and ambivalent class allegiance: on one side, his identification with the sufferings of the dispossessed; on the other, his sense of belonging by lineage and tastes to the class of possessors."⁶ Thus, the relationship between the "possessors" and the "dispossessed"—the "haves" and the "have nots"—emerges as a central concern of Melville's fiction, particularly the mutual responsibilities between individuals which form the basis of charity.

In "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs"—one of three paired stories or "diptychs"⁷—Melville clearly illustrates his convictions by considering charity in two different contexts—one American, one British. The serene but devastating poverty of the American poor, represented by Martha and William Coulter who would rather starve than accept charity is juxtaposed against the repugnant desperation of a mob in London who storm a Guildhall to scavenge leftovers from a royal banquet. In these contrasting portraits not only does Melville criticize the values of the underprivileged but he also condemns the attitudes of those who perpetuate social and economic disparity. Melville further utilizes the American/British contrast to attack the dearth of charity in the very institution that should provide it—the church—in a

⁴Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, *Cultural Locations of Disability* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 37.

⁵Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The English Notebooks by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Based upon the Original Manuscripts in the Pierpont Morgan Library*, ed. Randall Stewart (New York: Modern Language Association, 1941), 433.

⁶Robert Milder, "Herman Melville 1819-1891: A Brief Biography," in *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville*, ed. Giles Gunn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 20.

⁷Jay Leyda, ed., introduction to *The Complete Stories of Herman Melville* (New York: Random House, 1949), xx.

second diptych, “The Two Temples.” In these stories, extenuating circumstances render the physician-narrator disheveled and penniless, precipitating his curt expulsion from an exclusive worship service in New York (“Temple First”) yet earning him a complimentary pass, a free drink, and cheery goodwill at a theater in London (“Temple Second”). However, more poignantly than “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs” or “The Two Temples,” “Bartleby, the Scrivener” questions the underlying motives of charity as the lawyer-narrator’s conscience impels him to assist his increasingly catatonic employee—with disastrous consequences. These stories demonstrate that even though charity is a moral obligation, it is limited by the ability of individuals to act free of social prejudice and self interest. Melville understood well the implications of Apostle Paul’s warning to embrace only the pure spirit of philanthropy: “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.”⁸

Melville’s fundamental belief in the brotherhood of mankind predicated his view that humans have a divinely ordained responsibility to care for one another. Timothy Marr notes that “Melville rooted this cosmopolitan ethos in the creation story of Adam and Eve . . . he therefore felt a kinship with the ‘billions of posterity’ issuing from this common genealogy.”⁹ Little wonder, then, that the narrator of “Poor Man’s Pudding” scorns the Panglossian assumptions of his host, Blandmour. Instead of admitting the truth about the wretched conditions of the poor and, consequently, taking measures to alleviate them, Blandmour believes that poverty is actually a boon, an opportunity to take advantage of the beneficence of nature—a fact the narrator refutes at every turn. For Blandmour, snow is “Poor Man’s Manure” which he says “To the poor farmer . . . is as good as the rich farmer’s farm-yard enrichments.”¹⁰ Shaking the cold, wet snowflakes from his coat, the narrator counters Blandmour’s argument by inquiring, “But tell me, how is it that the wind drives yonder drifts of ‘Poor Man’s Manure’ off poor Coulter’s two-acre patch here, and piles it up yonder on rich Squire Teamster’s twenty-acre field?”¹¹ Blandmour has no convincing explanation for this phenomenon or for the narrator’s other rebuttals against “Poor Man’s Eye-water,” “Poor Man’s Egg” and “Poor Man’s Plaster” for

⁸1 Cor. 13:3.

⁹Timothy Marr, “Without the Pale: Melville and Ethnic Cosmopolitanism,” in *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville*, ed. Giles Gunn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 139.

¹⁰Herman Melville, “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs,” *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces: 1839-1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford, et al., with a historical note by Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library), 9:289.

¹¹Ibid.

wounds. While several critics suggest that Blandmour is Melville's parody of the glowingly optimistic transcendental principles of Emerson and Thoreau, William Dillingham maintains that Blandmour represents those in society who distort the deplorable living conditions of the poor. He notes, ". . . there is a clear set of opposites in the work: real poverty versus fake views of it. On a deeper level the contrast is between the human condition, as represented by poverty, and the way the world deals with that condition through the use of labels [Blandmour] has a label of bright optimism to paste over and thus obscure every black night of life."¹²

But the Coulters are no better than Blandmour. When the narrator visits the cold, damp, ill-ventilated Coulter residence, he not only vindicates his arguments against Blandmour but he also discovers that the Coulters themselves deny the reality of their own situation. When the narrator refers to the moldy, briny dish of rice and milk placed before him as "Poor Man's Pudding," a "quick flush, half resentful"¹³ passes across Mrs. Coulter's face, and she responds, "We do not call it so, sir."¹⁴ Pale and weak from malnutrition and cold, from her current pregnancy, and from the grief of losing her two children, Martha Coulter tries to maintain an optimistic outlook and makes a special effort to treat her guest as a gentleman, offering him the best of what she has. Her husband, William, is equally hospitable and talks about the horse that he shall one day buy from his employer for his wife, even though he knows she will probably die before he raises enough money to make it happen. He speaks of the rancid salt pork he has for his dinner like it is prime fare: "I got this pork of the Squire; some of his last year's pork, which he let me have on account. It isn't quite so sweet as this year's would be; but I find it hearty enough to work on, and that's all I eat for. Only let the rheumatiz and other sicknesses keep clear of me, and I ask no flavors or favors from any."¹⁵ His rationalization preserves his male dignity at the expense of masking the grim facts of his circumstances. He and Martha content themselves with what they have, finding comfort in the immense love they bear for each other. Martha confesses to the narrator that she feels guilty for occasionally giving in to depression: ". . . all the damp day long grief drizzles and drizzles down on my soul. But I pray to God to forgive me for this; and for the rest, manage it as well as I may."¹⁶ She finds solace in thinking of her dead

¹²William Dillingham, *Melville's Short Fiction: 1853-1856* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977), 120.

¹³Melville, "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs," 292.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 293.

¹⁵Melville, "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs," 293.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 295.

children in heaven and by reading inspirational passages in the volume of Dr. Doddridge on her mantel shelf—a book that Melville disdained for its pious platitudes. Marvin Fisher encapsulates the Coulter’s world view: “Along with Blandmour and, no doubt, Squire Teamster, who extracts maximum value from Coulter’s labors, they believe that charity demeans, that nature provides, that God is good, especially to the self-reliant man, and that, as William Ellery Channing wrote, ‘Moral and religious culture is the great blessing to be bestowed upon the poor.’”¹⁷ The Coulters are, thus, twice victimized: initially by their economic deprivation and ultimately by their own pride. Knowing that the Coulters would refuse any payment for their generosity, the narrator departs, leaving the reader with this final moralization: “The native American poor never lose their delicacy of pride; hence though unreduced to the physical degradation of the European pauper, they yet suffer more in mind than the poor of any other people in the world.”¹⁸ The narrator attributes this to “our own peculiar political principles” which he claims:

enhance the true dignity of a prosperous American . . . but minister to the added wretchedness of the unfortunate; first, by prohibiting their acceptance of what little random relief charity may offer; and, second, by furnishing them with the keenest appreciation of the smarting distinction between their ideal of universal equality and the grindstone experience of the practical misery and infamy of poverty—a misery and infamy which is, ever has been, and ever will be, precisely the same in India, England, and America.¹⁹

Even though the narrator claims that poverty is universal, the revolting scene he portrays in the London Guildhall in “Rich Man’s Crumbs” appears to be the antithesis of the sympathetic picture of the American Coulters. Melville characterizes the filthy, unruly rabble waiting to devour scraps from a feast of the victorious noblemen who defeated Napoleon as beasts: they are “lean, famished, ferocious creatures” who jostle the narrator and tear his clothes, reminding him of “a mob of cannibals on some pagan beach” as they “roar with famine.”²⁰ In stark contrast to the patiently suffering Coulters, this crowd demands the “crumbs of kings,”²¹ thus branding themselves as the “undeserving poor” who many believe should be allowed to die in the gutter.

¹⁷Marvin Fisher, *Going Under: Melville’s Short Fiction and the American 1850’s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 64-65.

¹⁸Melville, “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs,” 296.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., 298.

²¹Ibid., 300.

Though it had its precedents in colonial communities, this distinction between the “worthy poor” and indolent paupers was crucial to the debate over charity, particularly in America during the 1840’s and 1850’s, the time when Melville was writing these stories. One group, for example, the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP), maintained that their “contributors were entrusting them with funds ‘solely’ to give generous help to the ‘worthy poor’ and nothing to the lazy”²² An AICP publication emphasized that “every able-bodied man in this country may support himself and family comfortably; if . . . not, it is probably owing to idleness, improvidence, or intemperance.”²³ Marvin Olasky indicates that the AICP promoted “piety, frugality, and industry” and postulated that “the way to help able-bodied males confront sinful tendencies was to make sure they ‘should be compelled to work or left to suffer the consequences of their misconduct.’”²⁴ Established in 1843, the AICP set a precedent for charitable organizations—what is known as the “AICP movement”; relief agencies using the AICP model were established in most major American cities of the period.²⁵ As the AICP was based in New York, Melville—a New Yorker himself—was probably familiar with it.

The narrator of “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs” echoes the goals of the AICP when he proposes to his guide an alternative to the Guildhall charity: “And do you really think that jellies are the best sort of relief you can furnish to beggars? Would not plain beef and bread, with something to do, and be paid for, be better?”²⁶ The caustic irony in the guide’s repeated exclamation—“What a generous, noble, magnanimous charity this is!”²⁷—further intensifies Melville’s argument that the poor need a livelihood, not a handout, however regal it may be. Their bestial character simply reflects what Melville believed to be the capacity for evil inherent in all humans brought out by degradation and deprivation. The poor are, after all, really no different from the privileged in society, as the narrator realizes to his horror when he is mistaken for one of the mob.

Mistaken identity focuses the attention of the narrator in “Temple First” on the plight of the underprivileged and the hypocrisy of institutionalized religion in dismissing it. Weather-

²²Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, with a preface by Charles Murray (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1992), 27.

²³*Ibid.*, 28.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵Ralph E. Pumphrey and Muriel W. Pumphrey, *The Heritage of American Social Work: Readings in its Philosophical and Institutional Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 103.

²⁶Melville, “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs,” 300.

²⁷*Ibid.*

beaten from his three-mile trek from the Battery and wearing a tattered coat because his new one had not “been done last night, as the false tailor promised,”²⁸ the narrator encounters a prejudice he is unaccustomed to when the church warden refuses to allow him to enter the “marble-buttressed, stain-glassed, spic-and-span new temple.”²⁹ The narrator’s temporary poverty thus forces him to contemplate the world from a new perspective, exposing the decadence of the elite congregation who condone the exclusion of any element that would remind them of their responsibility to those less fortunate than themselves. Determined to participate in that communion which, in the eyes of God, is open to all humanity—“But for all that, I will not be defrauded of my natural rights”³⁰ exclaims the narrator—he secretly passes under a low, vaulted doorway and ascends a staircase to the bell tower. From this elevation he views the sanctuary below. As the organ blasts out a deafening hymn, the lay reader exhorts the gilt-clad congregation to assist the needy (“Govern them and *lift* them up forever”³¹) and the minister delivers a barely audible sermon on the text from Matthew 5:13, “Ye are the salt of the earth,”³² the narrator observes the “beadle-faced” warden drive “three ragged little boys into the middle of the street.”³³ The message of the sermon to go out and be “the light of the world”³⁴ is lost on both the narrator and the parishioners, while the warden blatantly disregards Christ’s plea to “Suffer the little children to come unto me.”³⁵

The irony of the scene is intensified by the narrator’s view through a circular ventilation window covered with “a sheet of fine-woven, gauzy wire work.”³⁶ The narrator observes: “I could not rid my soul of the intrusive thought, that, through some necromancer’s glass, I looked down upon some sly enchanter’s show,”³⁷ echoing Apostle Paul’s text on charity: “For now we see through a glass, darkly.”³⁸ The narrator’s attitude implies that the congregation would do

²⁸Herman Melville, “The Two Temples,” *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces: 1839-1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford, et al., with a historical note by Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1987), 9:303.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰Melville, “The Two Temples,” 305.

³¹*Ibid.*, 306.

³²*Ibid.*, 307.

³³*Ibid.*, 304.

³⁴Matt. 5:14.

³⁵Mark 10:14.

³⁶Melville, “The Two Temples,” 305.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 306.

³⁸1 Cor. 13:12

well to heed the biblical injunction, “Charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,”³⁹ a passage that Dillingham notes Melville had underscored in his Bible.⁴⁰ The narrator speculates that his heavenly vantage point, which makes him both an insider and an outsider,⁴¹ provides him with “a fitter place for sincere devotions, where, though I see, I remain unseen,”⁴² recalling Christ’s admonition in the Sermon on the Mount not only to pray but also to give one’s alms in secret.⁴³ Because the narrator believes “no Pharisee would have my pew,”⁴⁴ Melville levels yet another indictment against organized religion.

It is also significant that the narrator refers to the staircase in the tower as “Jacob’s ladder.”⁴⁵ For the biblical Jacob, this is “the gate of heaven.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Beryl Rowland argues that this ladder does *not* represent the narrator’s pathway to salvation because he does not embrace the charity that Saint Paul states is requisite to spiritual freedom.⁴⁷ But if the ladder itself is charity, suggested by the alternate name “charity” for the common American wildflower Jacob’s ladder (*Polemonium reptans* or *Polemonium caeruleum*),⁴⁸ then the lesson the narrator (and the reader) intuitively is that charity is the means by which one can ascend to a true understanding and implementation of Christ’s gospel. Because the congregation is oblivious to the narrator’s enlightenment, his ringing the bell to effectuate his release from the tower symbolizes not his own but society’s attitude towards charity which is “as sounding brass or a tinkling symbol,”⁴⁹ especially as it emanates from the ostentatious church edifice. “Temple First” is clearly, as Fisher states, “a double-edged critique of hypocrisy in American piety and American society.”⁵⁰

“Temple Two” reinforces Melville’s belief in the importance of compassion and community. In this story, the narrator once again finds himself in an unexpected, albeit transitory, state of poverty, but this time his affairs intensify his loneliness and isolation rather

³⁹1 Cor. 13:4.

⁴⁰Dillingham, 114.

⁴¹Melville, “The Two Temples,” 305.

⁴²Ibid., 306.

⁴³Matt. 6:1-6.

⁴⁴Melville, “The Two Temples,” 306.

⁴⁵Ibid., 305.

⁴⁶Gen. 28:17.

⁴⁷Beryl Rowland, “Melville Answers the Theologians: The Ladder of Charity in ‘The Two Temples,’” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 7.4 (1974): 10.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹1 Cor. 13:1.

⁵⁰Fisher, 52.

than his indignation: “Forlorn, outcast, without a friend, I staggered on through three millions of my own human kind” in “Babylonian London.”⁵¹ Searching in vain for a church, the narrator stumbles upon a theater where a “benevolent” and “cheery” working man⁵² gives him a ticket to the performance he could not otherwise afford to attend. The ticket is red, a color traditionally associated with charity,⁵³ and taking this pass prompts the narrator to reflect with consternation that for the first time in his life he has been offered and has accepted charity. His reluctance is reminiscent of William and Martha Coulter’s stubborn pride, but almost instantly his mood transforms into the conscience of the London rabble in “Rich Man’s Crumbs.” The narrator observes: “Next moment, my sense of foolish shame departed, and I felt a queer feeling in my left eye, which, as sometimes is the case with people, was the weaker one; probably from being on the same side with the heart.”⁵⁴ The narrator’s invocation of the heart links charity with love, pointing to a reciprocal relationship between those who give and those who receive. The narrator says as much when he contemplates if he should use the ticket: “It’s charity.—But if it be gloriously right to do a charitable deed, can it be ingloriously wrong to receive its benefit?”⁵⁵ Reasoning through his “unvanquishable scruples”⁵⁶ with the argument that every human being owes his life and all that sustains it to the charity of others, the narrator enters the theater where the performance is a parody of the church service he had witnessed in New York several weeks earlier. Unlike his reception there, however, in this “temple” the narrator is drawn into a spiritual camaraderie with the crowd and given a mug of ale by the young attendant on the condition that he drink to the boy’s father’s health. Whether or not this boy represents Christ, that “original Cup-Bearer who also gave His refreshment at the cost of personal sacrifice and in His Father’s name” as Frederick Asals maintains,⁵⁷ thus reminding society that “‘grace’ is purchased by Christ, and not by cash,”⁵⁸ the narrator’s rejuvenation dramatizes Melville’s conviction that

⁵¹Melville, “The Two Temples,” 310.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 312.

⁵³Rowland, 10.

⁵⁴Melville, “The Two Temples,” 312.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷Frederick Asals, “Satire and Skepticism in ‘The Two Temples,’” *Books at Brown* 24 (1971): 15.

⁵⁸James Duban, “Satiric Precedent for Melville’s ‘The Two Temples,’” *American Transcendental Quarterly: A Journal of New England Writers* 42 (1979): 143.

people must, to use E.M. Forster's phrase, "only connect,"⁵⁹ by recognizing their shared humanity and acting out of selfless love.

Melville's most powerful—yet enigmatic—demonstration of distorted charity is his story "Bartleby, the Scrivener." Baffled by Bartleby's repeated refusal to fulfill even the basic duties of his job (with his infamous line "I would prefer not to"), the unnamed lawyer-narrator runs a gamut of emotions from sympathy to anger until he realizes that the only legitimate emotion he should feel towards Bartleby is compassion. He quotes a passage from the Bible—"A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another"⁶⁰—and then he remarks, "Yes, this it was that saved me."⁶¹ When the lawyer discovers that Bartleby has been living in his Wall Street office, he is overcome by the isolation and alienation of Bartleby's existence. He exclaims: "Immediately then the thought came sweeping across me, What miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed!"⁶² This realization precipitates an epiphany for the lawyer: "For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam." The lawyer reflects, "Ah, happiness courts the light, so we deem the world is gay; but misery hides aloof, so we deem that misery there is none."⁶³ Thus, the lawyer acknowledges not only the "bond of a common humanity" but also the obligation of the fortunate to recognize and remediate the suffering of others.

The lawyer's awakening should enable him to address his problems with Bartleby in a straight forward context of Christian charity, and on one level, he does by offering Bartleby money, volunteering assistance with finding alternate employment, and even proposing to take him into his own home. But the solution is not that simple, complicated as it is by the lawyer's background, values, and vacillation between what he intuitively knows he should do and what he believes is socially and morally acceptable. Like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, the lawyer is compelled to tell his tale in an attempt to vindicate his actions to himself more than to anyone

⁵⁹E. M. Forster, *Howards End: Complete Authoritative Text with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Alistair M. Duckworth (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 168.

⁶⁰John 13:34.

⁶¹Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street," *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces: 1839-1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford, et al., with a historical note by Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1987), 9:36.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 27.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 28.

else because in his heart he knows—as does the perceptive reader—that his charity emanates from self interest. The lawyer reasons:

He [Bartleby] is useful to me. I can get along with him. If I turn him away, the chances are he will fall in with some less indulgent employer, and then he will be rudely treated, and perhaps driven forth miserably to starve. Yes. Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. 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.⁶⁴

For the lawyer, the principle motive of charity is personal redemption, which, as H. Bruce Franklin points out,⁶⁵ is related to Matthew 25: 31-45 where Christ explains that an individual's salvation is determined by whether or not he treats those in need as he would Christ himself. Not coincidentally this sentiment echoes the impetus behind much nineteenth-century philanthropy.

The lawyer's misguided view is not restricted to Bartleby, for he has consistently marginalized the other scribes in his employ with the same attitude: he gives Turkey a coat to create a better impression with his clients and then fails to understand why Turkey is insulted; he views Nippers' desire "to be rid of a scrivener's table altogether" as "diseased ambition,"⁶⁶ and like Dickens' Mr. Scrooge, he extends no financial concessions to his clerks, even though he is cognizant of their strained economic status. An elderly bachelor, the lawyer claims he is "an eminently *safe* man,"⁶⁷ emphasizing his detachment from the world and unwillingness to truly understand the plight of others. Thomas Dilworth states: "The distinction between action and disposition is important in Christianity: if you give alms without feeling love, the act is morally and spiritually worthless. Behind such giving might be desire to avoid guilt-feelings or to maintain an ideal self-image, neither of which has spiritual currency."⁶⁸

The lawyer's spiritual values are further brought into question as he goes "to hear a celebrated preacher"⁶⁹ at Trinity Church, well known in the nineteenth century for expensive pew fees which effectively excluded poor people from its congregation and for forming

⁶⁴Melville, "Bartleby," 23-24.

⁶⁵H. Bruce Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), 126-136.

⁶⁶Melville, "Bartleby," 17.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁸Thomas Dilworth. "Narrator of 'Bartleby': The Christian-Humanist Acquaintance of John Jacob Astor," *Papers on Language and Literature* 38.1 (Winter 2002): 49-75, <http://www.galenet.galegroup.com> (accessed June 26, 2007).

⁶⁹Melville, "Bartleby," 26.

“alliances with the city’s wealthy that worked to their great benefit.”⁷⁰ One notable deal was made with John Jacob Astor,⁷¹ a notorious multi-millionaire whom Carolyn Karcher describes as “a hated symbol of monopoly power, political corruption, antidemocratic values, and a new style of capitalist wage slavery.”⁷² The lawyer is proud of his affiliation with Astor, unconsciously implicating himself by association and implying that his business as a Master in Chancery involved a measure of forgery, fraud, and corruption. This connection has lead Dilworth to speculate that rather than mental illness or perversity, the nature of the documents Bartleby is copying may be the reason why he refuses to continue working because he may morally object to foreclosures which perpetuate the suffering of people forced to lose their homes and property.⁷³

Bartleby’s true motives might never be ascertained, but the lawyer’s actions reflect a full spectrum of genuine social attitudes towards charity: on the positive side there is the spirit of benevolence and brotherhood; on the negative there is anger, denigration and contempt for the idle, an unwillingness to see or accept the truth of poverty, and self interest—temporal or eternal by “purchasing” salvation through good deeds. To this list, the lawyer adds one more: despair. He states: “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. They err who would assert that invariably this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart. It rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill.”⁷⁴ The lawyer describes resignation to the belief that the poor are beyond help. He contends, “I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach.”⁷⁵ After vacating his offices in order to rid himself of the specter of Bartleby, the lawyer thrice denies any connection to him when questioned by the new tenants. Parallel to Saint Peter’s three denials of Christ, the lawyer absolves himself of any obligation towards Bartleby and by extension to his fellow man, even though he experiences “a certain squeamishness”⁷⁶ in doing so. Perhaps this is

⁷⁰Claudia Durst Johnson, *Understanding Melville’s Short Fiction: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents*, Greenwood Press “Literature in Context” (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), 80-81.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 81.

⁷²Carolyn Karcher, ed., Footnote 3 to “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street,” by Herman Melville, *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, eds. Paul Lauter, et al., 5th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), B:2626.

⁷³Dilworth, <http://www.galenet.galegroup.com>.

⁷⁴Melville, “Bartleby,” 29.

⁷⁵Melville, “Bartleby,” 29.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 40.

the verity that drives Bartleby to silence, one of what Dillingham calls “those living metaphors of life that unleash the scorching light of truth and burn out the tongue.”⁷⁷ The fact that Bartleby had previously worked in the Dead Letter Office in Washington reinforces Melville’s point that the real tragedy of life is not—as the lawyer maintains—the inability to reform men’s souls but the abnegation of responsibility for others. As Joseph Meyer suggests, “We can almost hear the lawyer asking, as Cain does, am I my brother’s keeper? The note of despair at the end of the story seems to indicate the answer is yes.”⁷⁸

“Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs,” “The Two Temples,” and “Bartleby, the Scrivener” all enjoin readers to alleviate suffering and promote equitable human relationships through *true* charity, free of social prejudice and self interest. So, what are the implications for the world today? The Giving USA Foundation released a report on June 25, 2007, indicating that in 2006, Americans increased their charitable donations to a record 295 billion dollars, the majority of the money coming from individuals, not corporations or foundations.⁷⁹ This report does not even address donations of time and labor. According to Arthur Brooks, a professor at Syracuse University specializing in philanthropy, “More than 61 million Americans volunteered for charitable and national service organizations in 2006, and about half of all Americans participate in volunteer activities each year” In Brooks’ words, the United States is “a land of charity.”⁸⁰ This charity is not confined to U.S. borders, either, as the international focus of a plethora of organizations such as CARE, Habitat for Humanity, and Save the Children to name just three illustrates. With this emphasis on charity, then, why has esteem for the United States diminished? The Pew Global Attitudes Project reports that there is “. . . a general perception that the United States fails to consider the interests of other nations when it acts in the international arena—yet those in this country [the U.S.] hold a very different view.”⁸¹ The answers may lie in the lessons of Melville’s stories: we must recognize the true problems of the world and where genuine need exists; we must be careful to provide the appropriate type of aid, not just handouts that do not address the core problems, and we must give in the true spirit of Christian charity, not motivated by self interest. Only then will what

⁷⁷Dillingham, 142.

⁷⁸Joseph Matthew Meyer, “Melville’s ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener,’” *The Explicator* 64.2 (Winter 2006): 84-86, <http://www.galenet.galegroup.com> (accessed June 26, 2007).

⁷⁹Jeffrey Thomas, “Charitable Donations by Americans Reach Record High,” *USINFO*, <http://usinfo.state.gov> (accessed July 3, 2007).

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

⁸¹“Information Initiatives,” <http://www.pewtrusts.com>.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Alina Romanowski terms “the diplomacy of deeds”⁸² have any chance of promoting global unity.

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⁸²“U.S. Works to Improve Image in Muslim World,” *Online NewsHour: Newsmaker Interview*, 27 June 2007, <http://www.pbs.org> (accessed July 3, 2007).

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