CUJ

Bartleby, the Epitome of Passitivity: an Elegy for Humankind

Esra Özilhan
İstanbul Kültür Üniversitesi

In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Maurice Blanchot discusses the concepts of disaster, the Other, passivity, and responsibility. His aphorisms can help us to analyse the relationship between Bartleby and the narrator-attorney in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street". This story presents significant insights into the relationship with the Other, and how the Other is a burden that each person involuntarily experiences. In this paper, I will discuss the reasons for, and the effects of, passive resistance, in addition to the inextricable feeling of responsibility that is experienced in the face of the Other.

According to Blanchot, disaster is not something that can be experienced as an individual. It has the power to destroy everything, yet it is out of reach. Disaster can be likened to an urban legend that we hear of all the time, but we cannot imagine what it is like to be a part of a destructive incident. While describing the concept of disaster, Blanchot often uses three words that enable us to comprehend the effects of disaster on humanity. Those three words are "outside," "to dissuade someone from doing something" and "to be exposed to something." If these words are closely examined, it is not hard to see that all of them are external elements that have control over an individual's understanding of the unknown and unverifiable. The desperate curiosity to grasp the knowledge of the disaster dominates the mind and the difficulty of picturing or imagining the event leaves us with the inevitable conclusion. After being dissuaded from thinking about the disaster, we are exposed to the thought of it, because now, we are surrounded with the instantaneous presence of the disaster as if it would happen any time. As Blanchot says "I am not threatened by it, but spared, left aside. […] it is in this way that the disaster threatens in me that which is exterior to me – an other than I who passively become other."[1] We are on the verge of disaster, we try thinking and talking about it, but we are not allowed to receive information about it, because as an experience, it can neither be verbalised nor verified. For instance, if a person assumes death as a

1. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* [translated by Ann Smock] (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p.1.

Çankaya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 9/2 (Nov. 2012), pp.333–339.

disaster, when he is dying, death ceases to be a threat to his being as he is experiencing it at that moment. Therefore, when someone experiences the thing that he once called as disaster, it will not be disastrous at all. In order to call an incident a disaster, it has to be out of reach. It is unpredictable, unknowable, and unutterable, like a being on its own. We cannot prevent disaster or prepare for it. We think that others experience the disaster, so we assume that they gain access to the knowledge of the disaster. However, once it is experienced, it is no longer called a disaster. There is no such thing as the knowledge of the disaster; on the contrary, we can talk about the knowledge itself as disaster. Awareness of the outside or the acknowledgement of the Other is disastrous. We are not able to welcome the Other, yet we do not consider him as an enemy. At this point, Blanchot asks "Then how can he become the one who wrests me from my identity and whose proximity (for he is my neighbour) wounds, exhausts, and hounds me, tormenting me so that I am bereft of my selfhood and so that this torment, this lassitude which leaves me destitute becomes my responsibility?"[2] We would not expect neighbourhood to have such unbearable effects, but that does not mean the Other and "I" are enemies. Nevertheless, according to Blanchot, the Other reminds us of the fact that we are not unique or indispensable, and this knowledge as disaster restrains us from communicating with the Other. Yet, we silently affirm the presence of the outside by losing our "sovereignty" and "subordination."[3] Bereft of selfhood and subjectivity, we are forced to take upon ourselves the responsibility of the Other.

Considering this brief summary of *The Writing of the Disaster*, we can now focus on the relationship between Bartleby and the narrator, and how it is constructed in terms of passivity and responsibility. "Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" tells the story of an inimitable man – a copyist who constantly utters the formula "I would prefer not to" when required to make any decision that tends towards an action. As the title makes clear, the story takes place on Wall-Street, in other words, at the heart of capitalism in the financial centre of New York. The narrator is an elderly, experienced attorney who runs an office in Wall-Street. "Being a man of peace,"[4] he never takes risks, nor does he strive for excitement or creativity. "Filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best,"[5] the good-humoured narrator is tested with the arrival of

2. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.22.
3. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.18.
4. Herman Melville, *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street* (Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, 2005), p.2, retrieved from: http://courses.washington.edu/art361a/readings/herman_melville.pdf, on 23th September, 2012.
5. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.2.

the story's chief character Bartleby, who is identified as "a motionless young man"[6] by the narrator in their first encounter. In need of supplementary help, the attorney hires Bartleby as the third scrivener of the office – the other two are known by their nicknames, "Turkey" and "Nippers," along with one office-boy named "Ginger Nut". Unlike Bartleby, these three can be regarded as cut-out characters, representative types given particular mannerisms. During his first days in the office, Bartleby works diligently on legal documents, sticking to his job description. The narrator's choice of words explicates the scrivener's ardent exertion in copying: "As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion."[7] The attorney expects his newly-recruited clerk to duly perform his duties, and we would think that his endeavour in copying legal documents justifies his recruitment. However, the attorney is not fully content with hiring Bartleby because he is not "cheerfully industrious."[8] He only writes "silently, palely, mechanically"[9] without communicating with others. Moreover, he is not so fervent in examining papers or running an errand, and each time he is required to do something other than copying, Bartleby disrupts the attorney's expectation of obedience by uttering the formula, "I would prefer not to". In order to comprehend Bartleby's silent passivity, it would be beneficial to break the formula into pieces. "I would prefer" is affirmative, and "not to" is negative. The state of being in-between is constructed with the utterance of this formula. As Jaworski puts it "Bartleby does not refuse, but neither does he accept, he advances and then withdraws into this advance, barely exposing himself in a nimble retreat from speech."[10] Not only does Bartleby withdraw from speech, but he also completely disregards the proprieties of social organization by dissociating himself from any kind of voluntary communication. Bartleby's firm yet calmly balanced formula is pronounced approximately twenty-five times in the story, and this repetition arouses curiosity and wonder in both ourselves as readers and the attorney-narrator, who does not know how to take action towards the scrivener, being used to the routine of legal transactions and etiquette. In order to understand the narrator's perplexity and distress of mind, we should take a general look at the incidents regarding Bartleby. At first, the attorney asks Bartleby to examine a small paper with him. He gently refuses him. Then,

6. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.4.
7. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.5.
8. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.5.
9. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.5.
10. qtd. in G. Deleuze, '*Essays Critical and Clinical* [translated by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco] (London: Verso, 1998), p.70.

three clerks assemble to analyse lengthy documents, but Bartleby refuses to join them. He does not even examine the papers he himself copied before. Apart from editing legal documents, he also prefers not to run errands for the attorney, such as going to the Post Office or telling Nippers to come and see the boss. What is worse, he resides in the office seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, and does not allow the attorney to enter the premises when he is "occupied."[11] When the attorney asks about his family ties and origins, Bartleby refrains from giving any information. In the end, he even abandons his sole duty, copying without coming up with a common-sensical reason. When the attorney questions his attitude, Bartleby prefers not to explain the reasons for his passive resistance. He defends his position by not resorting to violence or aggression. He takes his stand, never makes any concessions, and it is obvious that no one can deter him from his decision. It is this passive resistance and its interpretation that I now want to focus upon.

Passive resistance is disarming because there is no opportunity for cooperation and reconciliation with the Other. It is far more effective than an active battle because nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance. If the individual so resisted of a not inhumane temper, the resisting one perfectly harmless in his passivity; then, in better moods of the former, he will endeavour charitably to construe to his imagination what proves possible to be solved by his judgement.[12] In this quotation, the narrator frankly explains his situation with Bartleby, and informs the reader that he tries to reason with Bartleby for the scrivener is not arrogant in his behaviour. Bartleby's calm and serene attitude baffles the narrator because the scrivener neither accepts nor refuses anything. He does not say "yes" or "no", yet in some way, he asserts his will, which silences the possible attempts to come to an agreement. His gentle refusal does not reveal its reasons, so the narrator is bound by this passivity. The narrator continues to describe the "wondrous ascendancy"[13] of Bartleby over him and says, "had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from my premises."[14] If this mysterious man said no, he would be accused of being irresponsible, careless, and intolerant; but, he manages to survive due to the increasing suspense that hinders the narrator from providing a rationale for Bartleby's nonaggressive yet eccentric behaviour. For Blanchot, "refusal is said to be the first

11. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.17.
12. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.8.
13. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.18.
14. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.6.

degree of passivity,"[15] and Bartleby's refusal is "an abstention which has never had to be decided upon, which precedes all decisions and which is not so much a denial as, more than that, an abdication [and] no dialectical intervention can take hold of such passivity."[16] It can be inferred from these lines that Bartleby's decision to remain silent and distant surpasses the narrator's attempts to bring him back to "normality". Bewildered as he is, the narrator tries to deal with this abstention by finding a pretext to every little incident he undergoes with Bartleby. At the beginning, he assumes that Bartleby misunderstands him. After several similar incidents, he puts off the problem by saying that he will deal with it later, when he has time, thereby choosing to run away from resolving the matter. This relationship is like an experiment for the attorney, because he is not used to this kind of a relationship. Even so, he tries to compromise with Bartleby. However, the narrator is doomed to fail because he perceives Bartleby as a challenge which he has to confront. Even when Bartleby stops copying, the narrator presumes that the scrivener diligently worked on the documents, and this might have impaired his eyesight. He wants to legitimize his assumption by demanding the reason for Bartleby's decision not to write. Bartleby's answer, "do you not see the reason for yourself,"[17]drags the narrator into a mental agony, and he loses his hopes for reconciliation with his Other. Until this incident, Bartleby's writing has justified his presence on the premises, but this decision transcends any kind of reasoning and endurance. Everything is obvious for Bartleby, and he expects others to be aware of the reality. He has a profound reason for his inaction, and his determination causes the narrator to wonder "what kind of knowledge does this man have that I do not know of?" Fighting against passive resistance does not work, and this defeat inclines the narrator to discover his responsibility for Bartleby.

One may ask why the narrator struggles to keep Bartleby around, even when he quits writing. Can a person be responsible for someone who mentally haunts and even unmans him? In the case of this story, the narrator tries to bond with Bartleby, and when his intention falls through, he follows a different method: He chooses to let go off Bartleby, but the scrivener holds on to him and prefers not to leave him. Because of the fact that the narrator is robbed of his last excuse and logical thinking, he holds on to the feeling of responsibility. Blanchot says "my responsibility is anterior to my birth just as it is exterior to my consent, my liberty. I am born unto the grief of the other, which is

15. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.17.
16. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.17.
17. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.15.

the grief of all."[18] In other words, responsibility carries the burden of centuries and of mankind. This feeling casts pain upon us, strips us from our selfhood and sentences us to uncompromising solidarity as "the Other does not answer."[19] We depend on each other by being a burden to one another. For instance, the narrator feels "a fraternal melancholy! For both [he] and Bartleby were sons of Adam."[20] Like Cain and Abel, Bartleby and the narrator's relationship culminates in death when one silently passes away, and the other is spared but still threatened by death. With the death of the Other, the one that is left aside does not obtain the knowledge of the disaster, rather he realizes the inescapable sovereignty of the outside, the exterior. It can be said that he is responsible for "the death of the Other: a double death, for the Other is death already, and weighs upon me like an obsession with death."[21] Foreseeing the silent death of Bartleby, the narrator attempts to protect him from the inevitable so that he can put an end to his mental suffering and perform his spiritually assigned duty at the same time. Now that Bartleby, "the forlornest of mankind"[22] is in need of some fraternal help, and the narrator charges himself with a divine mission: to provide a shelter for his lonely clerk as long as he wants to be around him. Although the narrator seems to have good intentions towards Bartleby, he is easily affected by his lawyer friends' remarks about him, because people who visit the attorney's office see this strange man doing nothing but gazing upon a dead wall, gently declining to engage in any kind of business. These people question the narrator's purpose in keeping this ghostly figure at the office and these negative comments cause the attorney to move into another office, leaving Bartleby behind. Sitting upon the banister in tranquillity, the poor scrivener continues to occupy the old office, and causes trouble for the new members of the office. The narrator holds himself responsible for Bartleby, and when he returns to his old premises, he invites Bartleby to reside in his own house until he decides what to do with his life. Bartleby declines this proposal by saying "I am not particular"[23] and continues his reveries. Later, the narrator learns that Bartleby is taken to the Tombs – a very symbolic name for a house of detention – as a vagrant because he prefers not to be responsible both for himself and the Other. They meet one last time in the Tombs, where Bartleby dies because of starvation. His last words are "I prefer not to dine to-day, it would

18. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.22.
19. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster,* p.119.
20. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.112.
21. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster,* p.19.
22. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.14.
23. Herman Melville, *Bartleby,* p.23.

disagree with me; I am unused to dinners."[24] The narrator's divine mission terminates with the death of the Other.

We have limited access to Bartleby's story, and we only know what is shared with us by the narrator. Towards the end of the story, the narrator tells us a rumour that he has heard after the death of the scrivener. Before being a scrivener, Bartleby worked as a clerk in the Dead Letters Office. His job was to sort these letters that failed to reach their addresses and to watch them get burned. It might be possible to infer from this information that Bartleby was deeply aware of isolation and the dangers of not being able to send your words across. He saw that we all share in the same kind of grief, but we are suffering because we cannot always have a chance to convey our thoughts and feelings as we like. He obtained this knowledge, and did not make an effort to communicate because, according to Karl Jaspers, "he who has the final answers can no longer speak to the other, breaking off genuine communication for the sake of what he believes in."[25] With death, Bartleby is freed from the burden of the knowledge of disaster, and brings about a change in someone else. The narrator is touched by the outside, and obtain the only truth that matters the most: Knowledge of the Other is disastrous.

In conclusion, it is not wrong to say that just like dead letters, humanity speeds to death. "Bartleby" is a story about "walls" that both protect and isolate us from the outside. Walled in by a life that he would prefer not to be a part of, Bartleby, through his passivity, awakens in the narrator the sense of being a part of this isolated state of humanity. Therefore, a reading of "Bartleby" based on the aphorisms of Blanchot leads up to the conclusion that the encounter with the Other leads to an epiphanic effect, which arises with the feeling of responsibility and the failure of the attempt to rationalize passivity.

REFERENCES

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster* [translated by Ann Smock] (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

Deleuze, G. *Essays Critical and Clinical* [translated by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco] (London: Verso, 1998).

Melville, Herman. *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street,* (Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, 2005), p.2,< retrieved from http://courses.washington.edu/art361a/readings/herman_melville.pdf, on 23th September, 2012.

Sontag, Susan. *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Picador, 2002).

25. qtd. in Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Picador, 2002), p.13.