
This Norton volume categorizes ‘Bartleby, The Scrivener’ as a novel, yet it takes up scarcely thirty pages. The sense of paradox is increased when you notice that the editor, Dan McCall, declares ‘Bartleby’ to be Melville’s ‘first attempt at a short story’ (vii). Is it a short story or is it a novel? Ordinarily this sort of query leads to the designation of ‘novella’, but ‘Bartleby, The Scrivener’ doesn’t really seem long enough for that either. There is something altogether exceptional about this work: it is at once a short story and an enormously long, rich and intricate text. Written and first published in 1853, and bearing the original sub-title ‘A Story of Wall Street’, it is in many ways quite straightforward-looking. The narrator is a lawyer (we never learn his name) who rents chambers on Wall Street. He relates how he came to engage a pallid and mysterious young man called Bartleby to work (alongside a couple of other employees) as a scrivener or copier of legal documents. (No photocopying or multiple print options in those days!) At first Bartleby is very industrious and efficient, but then suddenly he changes: asked to check over some copying he merely replies, ‘I would prefer not to’. The lawyer is, understandably, bemused. But Bartleby continues to say ‘I would prefer not to’, more or less every time he is asked to do something. In exasperation the lawyer offers the young man money and requests that he depart the building: Bartleby ‘would prefer not to’. As an apparent last resort it is the lawyer who leaves, taking new chambers nearby. But Bartleby vexes the next tenant (another lawyer) in turn, and the narrator is summoned to help. Eventually Bartleby is arrested on the charge of vagrancy and put in prison, where he proves unwilling or unable to eat and in due course dies. As a sort of postscript the narrator reports that he heard a rumour some months afterwards that Bartleby had previously been employed in the Dead Letter Office in Washington. Summarised in this way, Melville’s story probably sounds really rather banal. In truth it is an absolutely extraordinary piece of writing that has compelled, baffled and fascinated readers, critics and philosophers for decades. Rather like Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw, Melville’s text seems to constitute a kind of trap: readers get caught. It is an astonishingly slippery work, in both tone and meaning. It is at once hilarious and heart-breaking, mundane and weird, sexless and erotic. It can be read as a story about homelessness and vagrancy, madness and justice, office life and civil disobedience, as well as a text on the subject of writing itself and on the relationship between literature and law. It is also a ghost story unlike any other ever written: it will haunt and puzzle you long after you’ve finished reading it.