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M

Wilde in Paris

Following his release from prison in 1897, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) immediately left England for France. During much of the remainder of his life, Paris was to be his home. Ill, bankrupt and utterly isolated, except for the occasional visit by some of his closest friends, he would sip his absinthe in the bars and cafés of the city that would still tolerate him, his own city of marvellous success and abysmal disgrace on the other side of the Channel having turned its back on him. A hundred years later, the memory of Wilde is still cherished in Paris.

Wilde's final home, the Hôtel d'Alsace, is still a hotel, but with a different name and a very different appeal. What was then a cheap backstreet hotel in 13, rue des Beaux-Arts, ten minutes' walk from St-Germain-des-Prés, has a hundred years later become "l'Hôtel", a four-star establishment with an elegant lobby behind the inviting entrance. On the wall beside the entrance is a plaque with the inscription: "Oscar Wilde Poète et Dramaturge né à Dublin Le 15 octobre 1856 [sic] est mort dans cette maison de 30 novembre 1900". (The erroneous year of birth is one which Wilde himself seems to have promoted, possibly in an attempt to remain marginally closer to the glories of youth.) One of the guest rooms is called the Oscar Wilde room and the manager informs me that this is where they think Wilde's own room was. It is a fine room, far removed from the frugality of the original, but it has no memorabilia, except a painting of the poet, and is not open to the public.

Wilde was originally given a pauper's funeral outside Paris, but as proceeds from his plays began to catch up with his debts, eventually producing a surplus, his remains were, in 1909, transferred to the Paris celebrity cemetery, Père-Lachaise, the final resting-place of Molière, Chopin and Balzac (and later also Édith Piaf and rock singer Jim Morrison). At the time of my visit, Epstein's famous, once controversial, Wilde monument was speckled with lipstick kiss marks, and there were bunches of flowers scattered around the grave, warming the chilly November afternoon in the gloomy necropolis.

Mats Mobärg (text and photos)



OLGA TODORIC

Bartleby, the Absurd Hero

When I see the blindness and wretchedness of man, when I regard the whole silent universe, and man without light, left to himself, and as it were, lost in his corner of the universe, without knowing who has put him there, what he has come to do, what will become of him at death, and incapable of all knowledge, I become terrified, like a man who should be carried in his sleep to a dreadful desert island, and should awake without knowing where he is, and without means of escape.

Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 194

Can man "escape", or in the context of Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener", is there a way out for him in an existence which has stripped him of his Being unto death? In my analysis of the main character Bartleby as an absurd hero, i.e. a man who has caught sight of a "transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given" (C 142), I will focus on alienation as a by-product of the human condition; and, more specifically, on what was referred to by Kafka as the "struggle of the self with itself to be itself." It is in the realms of this struggle that we will come to understand not only Melville's affinities with the existentialist tradition but also the underlying theme of "Bartleby, the Scrivener": that there is no hope for the absurd man to succeed in such an undertaking; and, yet, that it is in the midst of this heart-rendering struggle that he confirms his own validity as a human being.

In support of my approach, I will turn to some key existentialist notions. I will focus on *despair*, or forlornness, which is born from man's encounter with the absurd, i.e. from the confrontation of reason with a silent universe (cf. C 142). I will also examine the subsequent outcome of man's despair, which is *alienation*. Once Being (i.e. Being-in-the-world towards death) has revealed itself to man, his alienation from the world, from the *Other* and the self, is as inevitable as irrevocable. Yet the alienated man, in anticipating the future, is constantly reminded of this wretched state of being through his every-day life (e.g. through his encounter with another subject – i.e. the Other – who forces man to experience a different dimension of his own being), and thus it becomes imperative to him to find a way out.

Melville's portrayal of the main character, Bartleby, as the absurd man is best understood from Bartleby's relation with the Other for it is in his contact with his surrounding, and by extension with society, that his alienation and, subsequent, struggle to preserve his Being are revealed to us. Hence, in tracing the origins and manifestations of Bartleby's condition I will

focus on the relation between Bartleby and his employer, the latter also being a representative of society and as such, not surprisingly, “an eminently safe man” (M 1044) who has always been “filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best” (1044).

At the outset of the story, there are only a few minor indications as to Bartleby’s silently progressing alienation from the outside world. On Bartleby’s arrival at his new job at the law-office, his employer observes him and finds him looking “pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably *forlorn*” (M 1048; emphasis added). The employer’s reflections on Bartleby’s appearance are important to note for they set Bartleby apart from his surrounding; there is something different about him. However, it is not until after a few days at his new job that we get to witness the first signs of Bartleby’s alienation. Having worked very hard, producing “an extraordinary quantity of writing” (1048), Bartleby suddenly surprises his employer by refusing to help him compare a few documents; he does this in a singularly mild voice, saying “I prefer not to” (1049). As a result of this incomprehensible reply, the employer finds himself at a complete loss; Bartleby’s refusal comes unexpectedly, moreover, there is not the slightest “impatience or impertinence” (1049) in his manner. If there had been “anything ordinarily human about him” (1049), the employer would not have thought twice about kicking him out of his office. Instead he is left with Bartleby – “the forlornest of mankind” (1057) – who will henceforth continue to turn down his employer when asked to compare documents, and this always in his mild and disarming manner.

In order to fully understand the nature of Bartleby’s refusal, but also his “non-human” character, we must make a leap forward in the story and turn to the epilogue – the sole part of the story in which we are told something about Bartleby’s past. From this piece of information, obtained through hearsay, we find out that Bartleby had previously been a clerk at the Dead Letter Office at Washington – a place that breathes death by its mere name. Here, the employer makes an interesting analogy as he is reflecting on Bartleby’s destiny: “‘Dead letters’ does it not sound like dead men?” (1068). However, this is the closest that he will ever get to understanding Bartleby; for soon after, he tells us that it is not surprising that Bartleby, “a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness” (1068), turned out the way he did. The employer’s view of Bartleby does not thus change with the development of the story. To him, Bartleby will forever remain “the victim of an incurable disorder,” which had merely gotten worse as result of this previous job at the Dead Letter Office.

However, Bartleby is not a sick man. In saying “no” to his employer, he is, in fact, trying to say yes to an authentic existence. Here, it is significant to remember that Bartleby’s mild refusal, “I prefer not to,” reveals the two sides of his struggle, namely, the necessity and impossibility of his task. In saying “no”, Bartleby is rebelling against an existence in which “everything

is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness” (cf. C 142). However, he also knows the impossibility of his task; he knows that in saying “no”, he removes himself, paradoxically, further from an authentic existence. Yet, through his refusal to comply with the employer’s expectations, and simultaneously with those of society, Bartleby demonstrates his will to affirm his “Eigensinne” (selfhood) in an existence which has stripped man of his Being. In the story, the limitations imposed from outside – i.e. by his employer, and by extension also by society and life itself – upon man’s life are symbolized by, for instance, the numerous walls and enclosures that surround Bartleby at the law-office. For instance, upon his arrival at his new job, he is placed behind a screen in the employer’s office; this, so that the latter can easily call him whenever there is a “trivial” (1049) task to be performed. Bartleby’s actions are thus not those of a deranged being but of the absurd man who has caught sight of a transparent and limited universe.

In effect, one can suggest that this awareness on Bartleby’s behalf has its origins in his exposure to death at the Dead Letter Office. As a clerk there, he received a first-hand experience of death as the absolute in which all of man’s efforts are eventually swallowed up: “On errands of life, these letters speed to death” (1068). It is an awareness that grows more acute as Bartleby is continually confronted, in the midst of his every-day life, with further evidence of life’s finitude. Yet, Bartleby, tries to create a sense of belonging for himself; he attempts, through hard work, to make a place for himself at the law-office. However, given the fact that everything around him seems to resist him in his efforts to overcome his alienation, Bartleby’s estrangement is only further deepened, manifesting itself in an “eccentric” life-style, which greatly puzzles his employer (cf. 1055). Thus, one can say that Bartleby’s stoic struggle to preserve his Eigensinne removes him, paradoxically, further away from the prospect of an authentic existence, turning him into “the forlornest of mankind” (1057).

In the final analysis, one can say that Bartleby, who has literally been cornered into an existence of non-Being at the office, refuses to join the other side of misery, i.e. the ever-day life with and for the Other, where he would have to give up his sense of self; and he turns instead to the “way out” of an intolerable existence by remaining faithful to the sole option that is open to him, namely, his futile struggle. However, seeking a way out, when in reality there is no hope, is all but futile. After all, is not Being revealed to us by our very limitations to attain it? Thus, no matter how senseless the struggle may be, Bartleby at least uses a way towards understanding Being; and thereby preserves his dignity as a human being.

The greatness of man is great in that he knows himself to be miserable. A tree does not know itself to be miserable. It is then being miserable to know oneself to be miserable; but it is also being great to know that one is miserable.

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**Current Research**

In recent months a new, academic dissertation has appeared which should also appeal to the general reader of Irish literature.

Åke Persson's *Betraying the Age: Social and Artistic Protest in Brendan Kennelly's Work* (Göteborg University, Department of English, 1999), is a study of the Irish poet and critic Brendan Kennelly. By "work" is meant all the wide range of activities in which Kennelly engages in the public sphere and not only what is usually called literary work.

The concept of social and literary protest is used in this very readable new study as the point of departure from which to discuss the impact of Kennelly's critical essays, poetry and poetry readings, anthologies and media appearances in newspapers as well as on radio and television.

Brendan Kennelly remains one of the most exciting and controversial writers in contemporary Ireland. By placing the author's activities in a historical and social context, Åke Persson's study shows how closely interlinked these are with Kennelly's protest against the dominant values and norms of Irish society, a society still greatly influenced by the Roman Catholic Church.

ELISABETH WENNÖ

Work, Love and Gender in David Lodge's *Nice Work*

What seems to be the central concern of David Lodge's novel *Nice Work* is signalled in the quotation from Disraeli's *Sybil; or the Two Nations* which serves as an epigraph to the novel:

'Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, and fed by different food, and ordered by different manners...'
'You speak of -' said Egremont hesitatingly.

Unlike *Sybil*, however, *Nice Work*¹ does not simply refer to the difference between the 'nations' of the Rich and the Poor, but to a number of different worlds in terms of sex, gender, occupation, race, class, environmental areas, generations, cultures, lifestyles, institutions of production, not to mention literary genres and modes of writing. Commentators have in particular dwelt on the differences between the industrial and academic worlds that the main characters, Victor Wilcox and Robyn Penrose, move in, noting that the division and the inherent social conflicts between these worlds remain essentially unbridged despite the note of mutual sympathy on which the novel ends.²

It is obvious that the main protagonists are supposed to represent opposite and antagonistic worlds in terms of ideology, values, lifestyle, politics, social structures, and working life. They are, in other words, 'formed by different breeding, and fed by different food, and ordered by different man-

¹David Lodge, *Nice Work* (London: Penguin, 1989). All parenthetical page references are to this edition.

²See, for instance, Robert Burton, "Standoff at the Crossroads: When Town Meets Gown in David Lodge's *Nice Work*," in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 35.4 (1994): 237-43; Rudolf Böhm, "Universität und Industrie: 'Zwei Nationen' in David Lodge's *Nice Work*," in Konrad Gross, Kurt Müller and Meinhard Winkgens, eds. *Das Natur/Kultur-Paradigma in der englischsprachigen Erzählliteratur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts: Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Paul Goetsch* (Tübingen: Gunter Nar, 1994); Eva Lambertsson Björk, *Campus Clowns and the Canon: David Lodge's Campus Fiction* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1993). University of Umeå Diss.