

Editor's Note

To travel back to Manhattan nine months after 9/11 is to find a city with flags everywhere, testifying to a sense of community, of sharing, and finally of hope.

Events seen from the European side of the ocean are always perceived with a somewhat different perspective: in the case of 9/11, as many European newspapers titles read the day after, we were all — and still are — Americans.

At the same time, as americanists, scholars studying American culture, literature, music, we cannot but go back to our beloved American texts, and look for light in them: the great Melville stands right there, in the centre of the American scene, now, as he did in the mid nineteenth century: no story is more prophetic, and more clear-sighted than "Bartleby the Scrivener", as a warning against the power of money and the impossibility to communicate.

Strikingly enough, Melville had his sympathetic narrator use a prophetic simile in describing pale Bartleby, living, of a Sunday, in the deserted heart of business, Wall Street:

And here Bartleby makes his home; sole spectator of a solitude which he has seen all populous - a sort of innocent and transformed Marius brooding among the ruins of Carthage!

It is most likely that Melville had seen John Vanderlyn's painting of the same subject, exhibited several times in Albany before he wrote "Bartleby", but it is characteristic of his powerful imagination that he should think of the great and defeated Roman general in the context of Wall Street: the ruins of Carthage are dramatically prophetic of the ruins of 9/11.

Melville's story seems to point the path we should take in order to avoid further tragedies: not that of the dead letter office, not that of non-communication, not that of war.

Many Americans have tried to understand where there was a break of communications that may have led to 9/11, unacceptable and tragic as the event was. The art and the moral view of one of America's greatest writers can be our light, in trying to understand the past and the future, in trying to communicate within the global village that has still tragic rifts among cultures.

Rosella Mamoli Zorzi