

Melville's Majestic Missive: "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street"

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Abstract

In keeping with the spirit of American Studies, this article engages in an interdisciplinary examination of Herman Melville's short story, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (1853). Employing a broad literary-critical-historical methodology that also incorporates cultural and social theory, I sociohistorically contextualize "Bartleby" and demonstrate how this stylistically innovative short story anticipated later works of modernist, existential, and postmodern literature. Now internationally renowned as a classic of American literature, "Bartleby" is of interest not only for its historically innovative style—which continues to resonate with contemporary readers—but also for how it potentially serves as Melville's self-reflexive meditation on his then declining literary career.

In memory of Doug Freake (1946–2020): Scholar, teacher, mentor, friend, and bon vivant.

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Introduction

- 1 First published in *Putnam's Magazine* in 1853, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" was among the later prose works published by Melville before he turned his attention to writing poetry. Although enjoyed by readers of its era,^[1] "Bartleby" was scantily reviewed, for the short story was at this point in history generally viewed as an apprentice genre that was of relatively minor importance in comparison to the novel. Interestingly enough, it is with contemporary literary critics and theorists that "Bartleby" has most resonated, for as Sharon Talley notes, of all Melville's short stories it has "received the most widespread critical attention" (86) since the Melville revival of the 1920s.

- 2 As I contend in this paper, the enduring appeal of “Bartleby” resides in its status as a prophetic, visionary work. Richly documenting the psychologically alienating effects of living in the increasingly impersonal, class-divided urban metropolis of mid-nineteenth century New York City, the story foreshadows key stylistic developments that would come to define later works of modernist, existential, and—perhaps most notably—postmodern literature.

Preliminary Sociohistorical Context

- 3 Written by a financially compromised Melville, “Bartleby” was published anonymously in two installments in the November and December 1853 issues of *Putnam’s*. As Sheila Post-Lauria notes in her immensely informative essay, “Canonical Texts and Context: The Example of Herman Melville’s ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street’” (1993), *Putnam’s* was founded in 1853 as a monthly magazine oriented towards providing “a critical commentary upon the times” by operating in contrast to “the political conservatism and the sentimental rhetoric of *Harper’s Magazine*” (197). Catering to an audience that ranged from 2,000 to 20,000 subscribers, *Putnam’s* readers were generally “more intellectual, [and] politically liberal” than those who read *Harper’s*, which at the time had over 100,000 readers (Post-Lauria 197). Informed by a keen interest in soliciting material that “treated social, political, and literary themes from a perspective markedly different from the non-partisan, non-analytical stance of its competitor,” *Putnam’s* addressed the key social issues of its time, with many of its commissioned short stories drawing attention to “the plight of employees” (197).
- 4 While there is little evidence that Melville was familiar with the writings of Karl Marx, issues of labor and class alienation had always been of interest to him as a writer. A good deal of this interest was undoubtedly sparked by his own life history. Born into privileged circumstances, Melville gradually fell from grace as his father made a series of poor business decisions that would reduce the family to a state of genteel poverty by the time of his father’s death in 1832 when Melville was just thirteen years old. In the wake of his reduced socioeconomic circumstances, Melville would in 1839 sign up as a lowly cabin boy on a merchant ship bound on a four-month trip from New York to Liverpool. He would later transform these early life experiences into his semi-autobiographical novel *Redburn* (1849), which tells the story of a young gentleman from a formerly affluent but now bankrupt New York family who confronts the cruel nature of a Hobbesian world from which he was formerly sheltered when he joins the roughhewn crew of a merchant ship.
- 5 As Melville himself did, *Redburn* travels to Liverpool, where he witnesses some forgotten members of this capitalist-industrial society who lie homeless and dying on the streets as the city goes about its indifferent daily rhythms:

They were dumb and next to dead with want. How they had crawled into that den, I could not tell; but there they had crawled to die. At that moment I never thought of relieving them; for death was so stamped into their glazed and unimploring eyes, that I almost regarded them as already no more. I stood looking down on them, while my soul swelled within me; and I asked myself, What right had any body [sic] in the wide world to smile and be glad, when sights like this were to be seen? (Melville, Redburn 210)

While this passage today reads as though crafted within the vein of a sentimentalized Victorian realism, Melville would employ a markedly different literary style when crafting "Bartleby." [\[2\]](#) With "Bartleby," Melville offered readers of his era a darkly comic, stylistically innovative tale that introduced them to the work of legal scriveners, who endure the intellectually and spiritually stultifying tasks of repetitively copying legal documents by rote within a factory-like office environment. Educated enough for the times given their ability to read and write, these scriveners were part of a growing clerical class in America's then burgeoning bureaucratic society. As Andrew Delbanco notes in his book, *Melville: His World and Work* (2006), "Bartleby" shed light on a "commercial society that depended increasingly on multiple copies of many documents" (214).

- 6 Whereas *Redburn* embodies well-intentioned yet quintessentially sentimentalized Victorian concerns about the urban poor who had emerged in the wake of the industrial revolution, "Bartleby" is marked by a discernibly surreal style dedicated to chronicling the monotonous tasks performed by low-paid clerical workers. To this end, the story foreshadows concerns regarding the evolution of a mass bureaucratized society that would later be explored by such twentieth-century writers as Franz Kafka, Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, and Kurt Vonnegut. As the Trinidadian polymath C.L.R. James notes in his book, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (1953), the character Bartleby anticipated the emergence of "those millions of human beings who spend their strength, vitality, and capacity for living, day after day, taking down, typing, checking, filing and then looking for documents which are to them as dead as the dead letters Bartleby handled" (107).

The Psychosocial Dimensions of "Bartleby": Putting Up Walls

- 7 In her essay "Melville, Labor, and the Discourses of Reception," Cindy Weinstein argues that "Bartleby" breaks down the distinction between the factory and the legal office by documenting how the "presumably intellectual, promisingly original activity of writing—that which is meant to be distinguished from manual labour—takes on the structure of mechanical reproduction ruinous to the minds and bodies of workers" (214). By setting most of his story within the confining, claustrophobic environment of a small Manhattan office, Melville draws attention to such working relations as they occur on a microcosmic, interpersonal level. In this respect, the discernibly surreal aspects of "Bartleby" suggest a deliberate attempt on Melville's

behalf to move away from the nineteenth-century preoccupation with literary realism in favor of a style more appropriate to emphasizing the psychologically debilitating aspects of class and labor alienation.

- 8 All the events in “Bartleby” are focalized through the perspective of its unnamed narrator, who begins his story by providing readers with some information about himself prior to delving into his dealings with Bartleby. A self-described “elderly man” (3) who makes his living as an “unambitious lawyer” by doing a “snug business among rich men’s bonds and mortgages and title deeds” (4), the narrator seems intent on conveying that while he may enjoy an easy living, he is nonetheless a shrewd, highly competent businessman:

All who know me consider me an eminently safe man. The late John Jacob Astor, a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method. I do not speak in vanity, but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor [...]. I will freely add, that I was not insensible to the late John Jacob Astor’s good opinion. (4–5)

By invoking the name of Astor, whom Delbanco terms the “Donald Trump of his day” (213), the narrator underscores his highly influential business connections, for when Astor died in 1848, he was renowned as the richest man in America.

- 9 Although the narrator never directly states it, we can infer that Astor may have helped him to secure his past political appointment as a “Master of Chancery,” which he regretfully informs readers has since been abolished in the State of New York. In his essay, “Melville’s Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in ‘Bartleby,’” David Kuebrich sheds some light on the narrator’s former position as a judge of the New York State of Chancery, noting, “[t]he original purpose of the system of chancery was to supplement the regular judicial system and to temper and correct the rigidity of written law by allowing for the imposition of judgments based upon natural law and conscience” (399). Though evincing a somewhat humorous, roguish demeanor, the narrator betrays a Machiavellian dimension to his personality when he states that what most frustrated him about the abolition of his judgeship was that he had been counting on a “life lease of the profits” (5). His comments suggest he was likely awarded this position because he was regarded as a man who would maintain the status quo by not making any controversial legal judgments. As he notes, “I seldom lose my temper; much more seldom engage in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages” (5).
- 10 Clearly, the narrator is a figure who needs to exhibit a predictable, prudent demeanor in order to attract and maintain his affluent clients. In this regard, his relationship to the law differs from that of a famed American lawyer and statesman like Thomas Jefferson, for whereas Jefferson was a legal maverick, the narrator is clearly more interested in employing the law to further the financial well-being of himself and his

clients. Given Melville's preoccupation with essaying concerns about America's social trajectory throughout his literary career, it seems that with "Bartleby" he was providing an implicit commentary on how America's historic democratizing energies were being circumscribed within an industrializing, urbanizing capitalist society that was becoming increasingly bureaucratized and enamored of regimented routine.^[3] In essence, the lawyer's "eminently safe" (4) disposition can be seen as a reflection of America's then emerging obsession with socioeconomic control, which had become key to the nation's developing infrastructure that was dependent on trains running on time, employees working regimented hours, and investments following a steady trajectory of calculated economic growth. As Kuebrich notes, "Bartleby" specifically captures the development of America's bustling New York metropolis:

[T]he story reflects the city's lightning transformation into an industrial, commercial, and financial center. Rapid growth (New York's population increased from 124,000 to 814,000 between 1820 and 1860) and the attendant rise in real estate prices pushed buildings upward [...]. Burgeoning real estate prices also forced workers out of lower Manhattan in search of cheaper living quarters, which created an urban work environment severed from friendly and familiar relationships. (383–84)

- 11 Indeed, the alienating effects of working within this rapidly changing urban society are powerfully conveyed via the interior of the narrator's Wall Street business dwelling, where his employees repetitively copy documents in a claustrophobic work environment. Discussing the narrator's office, Kuebrich notes that while "the number of [its] employees is small," its "working conditions [...] mirror the rapid pace, hierarchical division of labour, and impersonality characteristic of the larger shop and factory that were replacing the traditional artisanal shop in which master, journeyman, and apprentice worked and sometimes lived together" (385). Describing the view from his office, the narrator notes that it looks out upon a "white wall" ("Bartleby" 4) at one end and a lofty brick wall, black by age" (5) at the other. The somewhat surreal white/black contrast between these two walls functions as a potential allusion not just to the growing racial divides of the era over the pernicious practice of Southern slavery, but also to class divides if we conceive of the bourgeoisie as operating within a clean, sterile environment that stands in opposition to the grimy, soot-covered world of the then burgeoning industrial proletariat. If the narrator is "walled off" from his low-paid clerical workers within the interior of his office, then these exterior walls can be seen as highlighting America's larger class and racial divisions, which were only becoming more apparent at the time of the story's publication.
- 12 Like such later modernist works as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), "Bartleby" underscores how individuals inhabit separate psychosocial realities that "wall them off" from one another, thereby giving rise to conflicting perspectives. In this respect, the narrator of "Bartleby" assumes pivotal significance. By focalizing

his strange tale through him, Melville slyly draws attention to this man's status as an unreliable chronicler who is crafting *Bartleby's* story to accord with his own psychosocial perspective. Though the narrator claims to be providing an account of *Bartleby*, it is readily apparent that he is actually more concerned with telling a story about *himself* and his own inability to comprehend this "unascertainable" figure (4), who briefly enters his life and temporarily disrupts its otherwise orderly routine. In essence, this is how "*Bartleby*" qualifies itself as a work about *conflicted* and *conflicting* psychosocial realities. As becomes apparent throughout the story's trajectory, *Bartleby's* troubled, enigmatic psychosocial state increasingly disrupts the narrator's own conception of selfhood, thereby threatening to destroy his worldview.

The Narrator

- 13 Though conservative in his business dealings, the narrator is a liberal person committed to fundamental notions of Christian humanism. An avid churchgoer, he places personal faith in notions of benevolence, charity, and goodwill for humankind. This is largely evidenced through his relationships to his employees, for he is by no means the sort of Ebenezer Scrooge variety of capitalist employer frequently depicted in Dickensian-style tales of the era. As he makes clear at the opening of his narrative, he takes an active interest in the lives of his scriveners: "I have known very many of them, professionally and privately, and if I pleased, could relate diverse histories, at which good natured gentlemen might smile and sentimental souls weep" (3). Fondly identifying his three office employees by the nicknames Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut, the narrator enjoys helping them whenever he can. Offering the aging alcoholic Turkey the opportunity to take his afternoons off, he also presents him with one of his own coats to make up for his shabby wardrobe. Clearly believing himself a friend of the working man, he employs the young Ginger Nut and agrees to mentor him in the legal profession at the behest of the boy's working-class father, who is "ambitious of seeing his son on the bench instead of a cart" (13).
- 14 Although the narrator seems to sincerely desire to help his employees, he is altogether unconscious of how his private notions of a capital-H "Humanism"^[4] are frequently subsumed to his own self-interest and complicity with the dehumanizing, regimented capitalist sphere that takes shape in microcosmic fashion within his own office. Alienated from his employees by his own benevolently controlling, self-interested worldview, the narrator fails to see how his acts of kindness and charity are often conflated with his own self-interest as a businessman. Although on the surface it is, of course, nice of the narrator to offer Turkey the opportunity to take his afternoons off, he makes this offer not solely out of goodwill but also from a rational analysis of the personal gains he will secure from such an arrangement:

Nevertheless, as he [Turkey] was a most valuable person to me, I was willing to overlook his eccentricities.[...] Now, valuing his morning services as I did, and resolved not to lose them—yet, at the same time inflamed

by his ways [*i.e., his alcoholism*] after twelve o'clock—and being a man of peace, unwilling by my admonitions to call forth unseemly retorts from him, I took upon me, one Saturday noon [...] to hint to him, very kindly, that perhaps, now that he was growing old, it might be well to abridge his labors; in short, he need not come to my chambers after twelve o'clock but, dinner over, had best go home to his lodgings and rest till tea time. (*emphasis added*, 8)

Similarly, when the narrator offers Turkey one of his coats, he clearly betrays his own self-interest by noting that Turkey's rather impoverished appearance is something of a "reproach" to him (11). It is as though the narrator has developed an outlook so permeated by his capitalist leanings that he cannot think in true altruistic fashion. Even his decision to mentor Ginger Nut seems motivated by his own self-interest: "So he [Ginger Nut's father] sent him to my office, as student at law, errand boy, and cleaner and sweeper, at the rate of one dollar a week. He had a little desk, but he did not use it much" (13).

- 15 Rather than attempting to improve the lives of his employees by paying them more money, the narrator instead falls back on charity, for although he realizes that Turkey is too poor to afford a decent coat, he does not consider the possibility of offering him a raise: "The truth was, I suppose, that a man with so small an income, could not afford to sport [...] a lustrous coat" (12). Participating within a capitalist sphere that he seemingly regards as being separate from his Humanist ideals, the narrator makes charitable gestures that are, to use the parlance of our times, merely 'band-aid' solutions to the rapidly emerging conditions of mass exploitation that were then coming to define American society. Commenting on the changing economic milieu of mid-nineteenth century America with specific respect to the New York legal field, Delbanco writes,

The glut in the Manhattan labor supply was destroying the old apprentice system whereby merchants took on apprentices from their own social class, who then rose in the hierarchy to join or succeed their masters. By the 1850s, apprenticeship in a law office was more likely to be a dead-zone job than a stepping stone to a legal career, and so the law office in "Bartleby" is a dungeon where broken men grow old, fidgeting away their vitality until the last sparks go out. (214)

Rather than focusing on the industrial working class in "Bartleby," Melville instead focused on the then growing clerical class of workers who were educated enough to read and write but nonetheless stuck in an entrenched class hierarchy, which essentially afforded them just as little possibility for socioeconomic advancement as the factory workers of the era.

- 16 Revealingly, the narrator betrays a subtle hostility towards those who exhibit the desire to progress beyond their socioeconomic station in life, thereby negating the very meritocratic mythology that he otherwise espouses. Though he agrees to mentor the young Ginger Nut, who also provides him with cheap labor, he views Turkey as suffering from a heightened sense of pride and characterizes him as being plagued by a “diseased ambition” (12). The narrator’s inherently patrician attitudes are further reinforced by the fact that he altogether ignores the socioeconomic strains that potentially contributed to Turkey’s alcoholism; instead, he ascribes his addiction to some form of genetic inferiority: “But indeed, Nature herself seemed to have been his winter, and at his birth charged him so thoroughly with an irritable, brandy-like disposition that all subsequent potations were needless” (12).
- 17 Having fused his Humanist values with his own patrician, benevolently exploitative demeanor, the narrator comes across as a byproduct of America’s historically entrenched WASP infrastructure. As Kuebrich notes, he “exemplifies the values and attitudes of the Protestant entrepreneur who fused his Christian faith with emerging economic practices in such a way as to legitimate inequality and class privilege” (386). As the German sociologist Max Weber famously outlined in his book *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), the groundwork for modern capitalism was essentially laid by Protestants who believed in “an all knowing, all powerful God” who had “preordained some people for salvation and others for damnation,” thereby leading them to rationalize that those who were “chosen for glory in the next world” would see “signs of divine favour in this world” (Macionis and Gerber 100). By interpreting worldly socioeconomic success as a sign of salvation, Protestants piously “threw themselves into a quest for success, applying rationality, discipline, and hard work to their tasks,” thereby building “the foundation of capitalism” (101).
- 18 Though clearly no religious zealot, the narrator seems influenced by a WASP-ish value system that has bequeathed him with an entitlement complex. Specifically, this complex seems to have led him to envision himself as a gifted individual whose prudent socioeconomic decisions have resulted in his success. Thus, while the narrator may view Turkey and Nippers as being worthy of his acts of charity, he evidently does not regard them as being deserving of higher wages. In essence, the narrator’s protected psychosocial reality has alienated him from even attempting to comprehend how the very infrastructure of his mid-nineteenth century society is rooted in vast socioeconomic inequality.
- 19 Clearly, the narrator’s own sheltered psychosocial conceptions are challenged by Bartleby’s perplexing behavior. Accordingly, “Bartleby” is structured around a narrative that proceeds inwards not just through its exploration of the happenings within the narrator’s Wall Street office, but also via its exploration of the interior realm of the human mind via its delineation of two markedly discordant psychosocial states. In this regard, the story enters notable *protomodernist* and *protopostmodernist* terrain, for it departs from predominant mid-nineteenth century literary techniques that

had examined socioeconomic divisions largely in terms of materiality in order to examine how conflicting psychosocial realities give rise to varied forms of class consciousness.

The Man Himself: Bartleby

- 20 Characterizing Bartleby as a "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn" figure (15), the narrator elects to hire him when he applies for a position as a scrivener. Assigning Bartleby a desk on his side of the office, the narrator essentially reifies the socioeconomic divide that separates him from his new employee by erecting a "high green folding screen" (15), thereby blocking Bartleby from his view. If we think of the color green as being not only the color of money but also a color associated with enviousness, then we can conceive of this screen as reinforcing the socioeconomic disjuncture that separates the disempowered Bartleby from the empowered, privileged socioeconomic sphere of the narrator.
- 21 Bartleby at first proves to be the ideal scrivener, for during his first few days of employment he exhibits none of Turkey's or Nippers' idiosyncratic behaviors. In fact, Bartleby works with such consistent and relentless determination that the narrator finds himself somewhat unnerved by his machine-like efficiency:

At first Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sunlight and by candlelight. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically. (emphasis added, 16)

Clearly, the narrator's comments betray his own conflicted views of Bartleby. Although exploiting this employee by paying him a measly wage of "four cents a folio (one hundred words)" (26), the narrator's sentimentalist disposition leads him to feel troubled by the distinctly unhappy, cheerless manner with which Bartleby goes about his work.

- 22 Industrious though completely passive and unassertive during his first two days of employment, Bartleby's meek demeanor seemingly qualifies him as the ideal wage slave. His behavior, however, undergoes a subtle yet discernible shift on his third day of employment, when the narrator requests that he compare a copy of a document in relation to its original, to which he replies, "I would *prefer* not to" (emphasis added, 17). Initially stunned that this should be uttered by a subordinate, the narrator repeats his request and is again met with the same polite response from Bartleby, who indicates that he would "*prefer* not to" (emphasis added, 18). Though uncertain of what to make of Bartleby's preference to not comply, the lawyer decides to overlook this matter, as he can find nothing directly offensive or confrontational in Bartleby's behavior: "Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the

least uneasiness, anger, impatience, or impertinence in his manner [...] I should have violently dismissed him from the premises" (18).

- 23 According to Delbanco, it is significant that Bartleby's utterance of preferred non-compliance should occur on the third day of his employment in the narrator's tomb-like office, for this timeline "conforms to the schedule of Christ's resurrection" (215). By asserting his preference to not comply with the narrator's wishes, Bartleby evinces an apparently "resurrected" human desire for personal choice and autonomy that deviates from his earlier machine-like rigidity. In this respect, his initial assertion of preferred non-compliance heralds a key transitional moment in the story: By subsequently acquiescing to Bartleby's wishes, the narrator unwittingly paves the way for the ensuing disruption of the power dynamic that pervades their relationship. Indeed, several days after first articulating his preferred non-compliance, Bartleby again expresses his preference to not comply with one of the narrator's wishes when he is asked to assist him in examining some copies of documents. Although severely perturbed by this second incident, the narrator finds himself unsure of what to do with Bartleby. Specifically, he seems struck by the fact that Bartleby is neither lazily nor insubordinately refusing to do his work, but rather expressing his fundamental *preference* for personal agency: "With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously from my presence. But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me" (19). Unable to bring himself to dismiss Bartleby, the narrator attempts to rationalize his tolerance of this employee's increasingly bizarre behavior as follows:

Poor fellow! thought I, he means no mischief; it is plain he intends no insolence. [...] He 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 more miserably to starve. (23)

One is here struck by how Bartleby's actions—or rather his *preferred inaction*—compels the narrator to rationalize his evidently cherished Humanist values in relation to his own benevolent self-interest. It is only because he values Bartleby as an otherwise industrious employee that he is willing to tolerate his increasingly evident eccentricities.

Protomodernism: Surrealist, Absurdist, and Existential Overtones of "Bartleby"

- 24 If we historically contextualize surrealism's fixation with breaking down the ostensible barriers between rationality, irrationality, and absurdism's emphasis on the often bizarre, alienating conditions of modernity and its disenchanting ethos, then the

protomodernist qualities of "Bartleby" become readily apparent. Indeed, such qualities are most tangibly evident in Melville's depiction of the suffocating, claustrophobic office environment, for Melville here employs a style anticipatory of the writings of Kafka. Additionally, we might note the increasingly bizarre relations that play out between the narrator and Bartleby throughout the course of the story. Frustrated with Bartleby's polite preferences to not comply with his wishes, the narrator notes that he "burned to be rebelled against" (25) by this enigmatic employee, who never gives him the satisfaction of doing so, thereby rendering him powerless to take action against him. In fact, the more Bartleby expresses his preference to not perform his duties, the more the narrator becomes resigned to accepting his highly unorthodox behavior: "[E]very added repulse of this sort which I received only tended to lessen the probability of my repeating the inadvertence" (28).

- 25 By infusing his story with such discernibly absurd dynamics, Melville was perhaps trying to underscore the larger absurdity of the narrator's attempts to reconcile his antiquated sentimentalist outlook with the burgeoning capitalist-industrial system that was then replacing America's northern mercantilist economy and rendering lower-echelon workers the equivalent of wage slaves. Full of sincere yet uninterrogated pride in his Humanist principles, the narrator does not wish to envision himself as either a bottom-line capitalist or a low-wage-paying, northern-state wage-slave master who has to crack the proverbial whip to get his employees to work. Thus, while the narrator is neither a cruel man nor a bad person, he is nonetheless deeply complicit with an inherently exploitative mid-nineteenth century capitalist system that is anything but humane.
- 26 In his essay, "Melville's 'Bartleby' and John Jacob Astor," Mario D'Avanzo posits that Bartleby's preferred non-compliance is actually a ruse that allows him to proceed in "carrying on a kind of guerilla warfare of passive resistance against the ethos of Wall Street and the Benthamite utilitarianism of his employer" (260). Yet while D'Avanzo here makes a compelling argument, I disagree with his position. Simply put, Bartleby is no power strategist. After all, with the exception of indicating his preference to not comply with many of the narrator's requests, Bartleby seems entirely uncertain of what it is he actually desires to do in the larger scheme of things.
- 27 Indeed, by not complying with the narrator's dictates, Bartleby seems more a man who has reached his breaking point than one who has deliberately crafted some sort of subversive agenda to undermine both capitalism and his employer's authority. By acquiescing to Bartleby's initial voiced preference for non-compliance, the narrator inadvertently alerts him to the effectiveness of the term "prefer," which thereafter becomes a staple of Bartleby's vocabulary. To be sure, Bartleby quickly comes to appreciate the power of this term in his exchanges with the narrator, for its invocation allows him to subvert the narrator's authority without directly disobeying his requests. In essence, the term "prefer" provides Bartleby with the opportunity to rhetorically deconstruct the employer/employee dynamic of his relationship to the

narrator, thereby reconfiguring the nature of their relationship and forcing the narrator to recognize that Bartleby has fundamental preferences for human recognition that stand apart from his monotonous clerical role.

- 28 The paradox, of course, is that while Bartleby may “prefer” to deviate from his assigned clerical tasks, his monotonous employment seems to have rendered him a veritable human automaton who is entirely lost when it comes to determining what it is that he desires in life. Having functioned as a lowly scrivener—a human prototype of the future Xerox machine—for so long, Bartleby has become an instrument or tool of society rather than an active, engaged participant within it. Thus, while Bartleby seems to recognize that he does not wish to spend the rest of his life coping on demand as a scrivener, he also appears to be at a curious loss when it comes to articulating what defines him as an individual. Although he evinces sparks of desire for a sense of individualized agency that might allow him to stand apart from his role as the narrator’s scrivener, he nonetheless seems unable to fathom any other sort of existence. Here we might think of Kafka’s short story “A Hunger Artist” (1922), in which the titular character dedicates himself to starving away in a cage before the public only because he does not know what else to do with himself. In much the same way that Kafka’s hunger artist entraps himself within his cage, Bartleby seems so alienated from the ebb and flow of humanity that he willingly entraps himself within the walls of the narrator’s office. Indeed, when the narrator elects to stop by his office one Sunday morning, he discovers that Bartleby has taken up residence there:

Quite surprised, I called out, when to my consternation a key was turned from within, and thrusting his lean visage at me, and holding the door ajar, Bartleby appeared [...] saying quietly that he was sorry, but he was deeply engaged just then, and—preferred not admitting me at present. In a brief word two, he moreover added, that perhaps I had better walk around the block two or three times, and by that time he would have concluded his affairs. (28–29)

Now living within the very office that he works at, Bartleby seems to have assumed the role of a lifeless being who has become so accustomed to his scrivener status that he prefers entombment within his workplace to the lifeworld that exists beyond its walls.

- 29 If we further consider this notion of Bartleby as a sort of embodiment of the living dead,^[5] then we can appreciate how he comes to metaphorically haunt his employer, whose entire self-assured demeanor of WASP entitlement becomes increasingly destabilized as a result of his dawning awareness of Bartleby’s bleak existence:

For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not unpleasing sadness. The bond of common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A

fraternal melancholy! For Bartleby and I were sons of Adam. I remembered the bright silks and sparkling faces I had seen that day, in gala trim, swan-like sailing down the Mississippi of Broadway; and I contrasted them with the pallid copyist and thought to myself, Ah, happiness, so we deem the world is gay, but misery hides aloof, so we deem that misery is none. . . . Presentiments of strange discoveries hovered around me. The scrivener's pale form appeared to me laid out, among uncaring strangers in its shivering winding sheet. (31)

His own outlook and psychosocial perspective increasingly challenged by his interactions with Bartleby, the narrator finds his former sense of sympathy and pity for this figure transmuted into "repulsion" (33): "My first emotions had been those of pure melancholy and sincerest pity; but just in proportion as the forlornness of Bartleby grew and grew to my imagination, did that same melancholy merge into fear, that pity into repulsion" (33).

- 30 Obviously concerned with protecting the stability of his own psychosocial worldview, the narrator labels Bartleby the "victim of an innate and incurable disorder" (34). Electing to question Bartleby about his personal history, the narrator proceeds with the understanding that he will terminate him and send him on his way with a twenty-dollar bonus and a pledge to provide him with further support if he refuses to reveal anything about his business. Bartleby, of course, prefers not to answer any of the narrator's questions and instead elects to keep his gaze focused on the narrator's bust of Cicero: "He did not look at me while I spoke, but kept his glance fixed upon my bust of Cicero, which as I then sat, was directly behind me, some six inches above my head" (3).
- 31 On a purely visual level, we might think of the pale whiteness of the bust as being reflective of Bartleby's own status as a pale, emotionally inanimate individual, for the narrator has earlier drawn precisely such a connection: "[H]ad there been anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. But, as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-Paris bust of Cicero out of doors" (18). Considered on a deeper level, however, the bust obviously brings to mind the views of Cicero himself. As classics scholar Michael Grant notes of this famed Roman lawyer, orator, and rhetorician, Cicero was an early proponent of humanism, who held that "the persons and opinions of all human beings [...] had a right to be acknowledged and treated with respect" (11). By remaining visually fixated on this bust, Bartleby is perhaps attempting to appeal to the cherished values of the narrator, who obviously venerates the ideals that Cicero had championed. It is important to note, however, that Cicero frequently contradicted his professed beliefs. Aside from venerating a Roman republic that saw nothing wrong with the inherently dehumanizing practice of slavery, Cicero frequently employed his rhetorical skills to advance his own self-interested pursuits. As James Mannion notes, Cicero frequently "intended to use philosophy as a tool to

further his political goals” (37). Certainly, Melville himself was familiar with Cicero’s life and philosophy, for in 1837 he had joined the Ciceronian Debating Society in Albany, though he would leave shortly afterwards when the group broke into internal disruption that resulted in his being accused of somehow becoming its “principle destroyer” (Parker 111). Bearing this information in mind, it would seem that “Bartleby” constitutes Melville’s critique of the narrator’s uninterrogated Humanist values.

- 32 Unable to elicit any personal information from Bartleby, the narrator informs him that his services will no longer be required. Upon receiving this news, however, Bartleby simply indicates his preference to not quit his employment and informs the narrator that he has now altogether “given up copying” as a scrivener (“Bartleby” 39). Bewildered, the narrator now cannot think of a way to rid himself of this employee, whose “cadaverous” (44) presence perpetually haunts him: “Turn the man out by an actual thrusting I could not; to drive him away by calling him hard names would not do; calling in the police was an unpleasant idea; and yet, permit him to enjoy his *cadaverous* triumph over me – this too I could not think of” (emphasis added, 44). Disturbed by Bartleby’s constant presence within his office, the narrator, one suspects, would like to exorcise himself of this eerily cadaverous figure by driving a stake through his heart, for Bartleby is almost vampirically draining him of his ability to maintain his normal demeanor of rationalism and self-restraint. Construed in this sense, it is not so much a matter of the narrator fearing what Bartleby is doing to him as fearing what he may do to Bartleby:

I was now in such a state of nervous resentment that I thought it but prudent to check myself. [...] I remembered the tragedy of the unfortunate Adams and the still more unfortunate Colt in the solitary office of the latter; and how poor Colt, being dreadfully incensed by Adams, and imprudently permitting himself to get wildly excited, was at unawares hurried into his fatal act—an act which certainly no man could possibly deplore more than the actor himself. Often it had occurred to me in my ponderings upon the subject, that had that altercation taken place in the public street or a private residence, it would not have terminated as it did. It was the circumstance of being alone in a solitary office, upstairs, of a building entirely unhalloed by humanizing domestic associations [...] this it must have been, which greatly helped to enhance the irritable desperation of the hapless Colt. (46–47)

Understood in historical context, this passage was imbued with particular significance for Melville’s New York readership. As Barbara Foley observes in her article, “From Wall Street to Astor Place: Historicizing Melville’s Bartleby” (2000), the passage refers to the 1842 trial of “the businessman John C. Colt, who, in an uncontrolled rage, murdered the printer Samuel Adams in Adams’s [Wall Street] office”

(89). By including this historical reference within "Bartleby," Melville was likely attempting to underscore how the claustrophobic, dehumanizing realm of office life could—under the right conditions—have potentially terrifying effects on the human psyche.

- 33 Clearly, Bartleby proves a maddeningly frustrating individual to comprehend for the narrator and readers alike, for beyond his stated preferences of non-compliance, he seems devoid of any real desires or motivations. Having lived a subservient existence for such a prolonged period of time, Bartleby is seemingly unable to represent himself. Accordingly, his behavior is perhaps best explained by the fact that he has forever been spoken for by others, thereby rendering him unable to represent himself. Hence, the concept of agency is a terrifying notion for Bartleby, who seems to envision himself as the narrator's ward. Here, we might again turn our attention to Bartleby's fixation on the narrator's bust of Cicero, who believed in a paternalistic "governing class educated to a higher standard of conduct" representing the needs and wants of the supposed "lesser" members of the Republic (Griffin and Atkins xxvii).

"Bartleby" and Sociopolitics

- 34 While I have previously employed the term 'psychosocial' in discussing the conflicting perceptions of Bartleby and the narrator, it seems readily apparent that class-based ideology has deeply affected the respective realities of both men. On a basic level, it is here tempting to invoke the work of the revisionist Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, who argued that the capitalist state largely controlled its citizens via ideological state mechanisms. As Althusser regarded matters, capitalist ideology was not chiefly orchestrated through *Repressive State Apparatuses* (RSAs), such as the police, military, and prison system, but rather via *Ideological State Apparatuses* (ISAs) that were constituted in such key societal entities as the Religious ISA, the Educational ISA, the Family ISA, the Legal ISA, and the Political ISA (Althusser 17–19).
- 35 An Althusserian reading of "Bartleby" would thus suggest that both the narrator and Bartleby are the economic and ideological byproducts of America's then burgeoning capitalist state, which has relegated them to different socioeconomic spheres within its hierarchy. In accordance with such a reading, the upper-middle-class narrator would be seen as lionizing John Jacob Astor, who represents the pinnacle of capitalist achievement, whereas Bartleby would be seen as occupying the lower strata of the capitalist order. Unable to truly imagine an existence apart from his employer, Bartleby's subservient, directionless demeanor would thus confirm how he has been hailed or interpellated into compliance with capitalist ideology via his lifelong exposure to various Ideological State Apparatuses.
- 36 Yet while such an Althusserian reading may be ostensibly appealing, it seems a far too overdetermined form of analysis to account for the immense complexity of Mel-

ville's story. As Sara Mills observed in her book *Michel Foucault* (2003), "Marxist theoreticians, such as that of [sic] Louis Althusser, have been found to be largely unsatisfactory since they focus only on a one-way traffic of power, from the top downwards" (34). Accordingly, Foucault, a former pupil of Althusser, reconfigured Althusser's top-down model of ideology and repression. As Mills notes, "Foucault's bottom-up model of power, that is his focus on the way power relations permeate all relations within a society, enables an account of the mundane and daily ways in which power is contested" (34).

- 37 Certainly, a Foucauldian conceptualization of power relations seems a more fitting theoretical modality to consider in relation to Melville's story, which focuses extensively on the vis-à-vis interactions of the narrator and Bartleby. Indeed, by envisioning this relationship from a Foucauldian perspective, one can better appreciate how the narrator and Bartleby's employer/employee relationship is fundamentally destabilized throughout the course of the story. Specifically, Bartleby wields a sense of bottom-up power in relation to the narrator by indirectly appealing to his cherished Humanist values, thereby shedding light on the complex nature of an implicit Ciceronian power pact between a social superior and inferior. Here, the fundamental question of what an empowered individual 'owes' to a dependant is raised. Essentially taking note of this issue, Delbanco writes,

Melville's treatment of the lawyer's confusion over how to respond to this mutilated soul is a finely wrought portrait of a morally vexed man. But it is also a meditation on a large moral issue under dispute in antebellum America: how to define collective responsibility at a time when the old ad hoc welfare system of churches and charities could no longer cope with the growing numbers of workers and families left destitute by the boom-and-bust cycle of the industrial economy. As casualties mounted, the scope of corporate responsibility was being narrowed in the courts by business-friendly judges who routinely ruled against plaintiffs in cases of workplace injury and property loss. In the 1850s, the United States was fast becoming a laissez-faire society with no articulated system for protecting individuals against impersonal power. (220)

In this respect, we should note how Bartleby's inherently passive appeals to the narrator contrast sharply with the volatile nature of employer-employee labor relations as they actually existed at this point in American history. Commenting on the status of the New York labor movement during the mid-nineteenth century, Kuebrich writes, "New York [at this time] witnessed a broad range of militant working-class political turmoil: mass meetings, parades, rallies, demonstrations, and strikes" (381).

- 38 Clearly, Bartleby's milquetoast demeanor contrasts sharply from the revolutionary history and spirit of his nation. Obviously depressed by his lower-class existence, Bartleby nonetheless seems to feel that he is inextricably bound to the narrator, with

whom he seems to feel he has achieved some sort of unspoken concord. Certainly, this is one of the most baffling and discernibly absurd elements of the story, for despite finally reaching a point where he has ceased to perform his duties as a scrivener, Bartleby obdurately clings to the idea that he and the narrator possess some sort of connection that transcends his clerical responsibilities. In essence, Bartleby disavows notions of revolting against his dehumanizing existence in favor of naively believing that the narrator will provide him with some form of escape from his otherwise pathetic malaise.

"Bartleby": Concluding Dynamics

- 39 Interestingly, Bartleby's implicit appeals to the narrator's Humanist value system almost succeeds. As the narrator notes,

Gradually I slid into the persuasion that these troubles of mine touching the scrivener had been all predestined from eternity, and Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise providence, which it was not for a mere mortal of me to fathom. [...] At least I see it, I feel it; I penetrate to the predestined purpose of my life. [...] Others may have loftier part to enact; but my mission in the world, is to furnish you with office room for such period as you see fit to remain. (48–49)

Nonetheless, the narrator ultimately elects to rid himself of Bartleby when he comes to feel that his own interests are compromised. He essentially negates his supposedly altruistic Humanist values by revealing how they are intertwined with a self-interested socioeconomic rationale:

I believe that this wise and blessed frame of mind would have continued with me, had it not been for the unsolicited and uncharitable remarks obtruded upon me by my professional friends. [...] But thus it often is, that the constant friction of illiberal minds wears out at last the best resolves of the more generous. (49)

As the narrator makes clear, Bartleby's bizarre behavior is now "scandalizing" his professional reputation amongst his business colleagues and clients (50), who clearly do not share his tolerance for this figure's eccentricities: "At last I was made aware that all through the circle of my professional acquaintance, a whisper of wonder was running around, having reference to this strange creature I kept at my office. This worried me very much" (50). In one of the most discernibly absurd moments in the story, the narrator does not evict Bartleby, whom he terms an "intolerable incubus" (50), but instead elects to abandon him by relocating his business to a new dwelling. The narrator has obviously reached the point where he, the employer, must now "quit" Bartleby, his employee: "Since he will not quit me, I must quit him" (52). Like a desperate victim of a shipwreck who kicks off a drowning man to survive, the

narrator abandons Bartleby, whom he now sees as being beyond the hope of salvation.

- 40 Subsequently comfortably ensconced in his new business premises, the narrator's escape from Bartleby seems all but assured until he is one day visited by "a perturbed looking stranger" (53) who informs him that Bartleby remains in his old building, where he has taken up residence as squatter: "He refuses any copying; he says he prefers not to; and he refuses to quit the premises" (53). Though the narrator initially disavows responsibility for this former employee, a delegation of tenants and the irate landlord from his old building arrive in his office several days later to protest that he must accept responsibility for him. As the landlord notes,

These gentlemen, my tenants, cannot stand it any longer [...] he now persists in haunting the building generally, sitting upon the banisters of the stairs by day, and sleeping in the entry by night. Everybody is concerned; clients are leaving the offices; some fears are entertained by a mob; something you must do, and that without delay. (54)

Indeed, as the landlord and his tenants see it, the narrator is the one who is responsible for bequeathing Bartleby to them, and thus he is the one who should assume responsibility for him.

- 41 Compelled to return to his old building, the narrator confronts Bartleby and warns him that modern society has no tolerance for the non-productive: "Either you must do something, or something must be done to you" (56). Proposing a series of possible solutions to Bartleby's malaise, the narrator suggests that he might like to take up a position as a clerk, a bartender, a bill collector, or a travelling companion to a young man on a journey abroad. All of these suggestions are rejected by Bartleby, however, who instead indicates that he would "prefer not to make any change at all" (57). Having refused all of the possibilities raised by the narrator, Bartleby even rejects his final suggestion that he return home to live with him until they can agree on some "convenient arrangement" to address his homelessness (57).
- 42 Shortly after severing ties with Bartleby, the narrator receives a letter from the landlord of his old building, requesting that he provide a deposition of the facts to the authorities with regard to Bartleby, who has been arrested and sent to the New York City jail—colloquially known as "the Tombs"—for vagrancy. Although the narrator initially feels "indignant" (58) at the notion of Bartleby's imprisonment, he quickly concludes that institutionalization now seems the only logical solution: "The landlord's energetic, summary disposition had led him to adopt a procedure which I do not think I would have decided upon myself; and yet, as a last resort, under such peculiar circumstances, it seemed the only plan" (58). Incarcerated, Bartleby finds himself literally "walled off" from society and the narrator, who is able to return to

his ordered psychosocial reality as a result of no longer having to fret over this unfathomable former employee. Commenting on the key tensions that define the story, Delbanco writes,

The radical voice in Melville says, "Save him, succor him, embrace him as a child of God," while the conservative voice says, "What more can I do for him? And if I turn my whole life over to him, what will become of others who depend on me? In "Bartleby," these two voices speak as they do in life; they speak, that is, simultaneously. (221)

In the end, institutionalization assumes a role of key importance in the story, as it effectively removes Bartleby from public life.

- 43 Viewed from an Althusserian perspective, Bartleby's imprisonment can be construed as an example of how the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) kicks in to sanction his unwillingness to comply with capitalism and accept a fixed socioeconomic role. Foucault, who examines the eighteenth-century evolution of incarceration in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975), here outlines how "controlling the mind is a more effective means of social control than punishing the body" given how "the concept of an extended, dehumanizing punishment holds greater terror than that of a quick, if brutal, release into the freedom of death through execution" (Stokes 187). Construed in relation to the work of both Althusser and Foucault, Bartleby's internment effectively demonstrates how capitalist society has implicit disciplinary methods for dealing with those who refuse to conform to its ostensible "free market" values.
- 44 With Bartleby imprisoned via the impersonal forces of societal organization, the narrator no longer feels the burden of personal responsibility for him. Nonetheless, his charitable impulses again kick in, and he elects to visit Bartleby to see if he can in any way ameliorate the conditions of his incarceration. Here Melville again underscores the wall/social compartmentalization metaphor that has played throughout the story:

Being under no disgraceful charge, and quite serene and harmless in all his ways, they had permitted him freely to wander about the prison, and especially in the closed grass-platted yards thereof. And so I found him there, standing all alone in the quietist of yards, his face towards a high wall, while all around, from the narrow slits of the jail windows, I thought I saw him peering out upon him the eyes of murderers and thieves. (59)

Having undergone a social trajectory that has seen him transition from a cramped, compartmentalized office on Wall Street to the confines of the New York City prison, Bartleby has gone from being a socially marginalized individual to one removed from society. Overlooked or altogether ignored by people in the past, Bartleby is now relegated to a holding grounds for those deemed to be social detritus.

- 45 Nonetheless, Bartleby's pathetic fate seems to have imbued him with a sense of lucidity in regard to his true alienation from the narrator. He now understands his misplaced faith in this figure and responds to his greeting by directly voicing his desire to sever all ties with him: "I know you," he said, without looking round—"and I want nothing to say to you" (60). The latent hostility that Bartleby here evinces towards his former employer is clearly different from his previous interactions with him, for he now seems to recognize that the narrator can neither comprehend nor save him from his depressive malaise, which has ultimately led to his imprisonment. Tragically disillusioned, Bartleby's final solution to his plight is the renunciation of life itself. When the narrator returns to the prison a few days later to attempt another dialogue with Bartleby, he finds him lying in the prison yard, where he has died from self-starvation.
- 46 Denied the emotional sustenance required to survive under the alienating conditions of modernity, Bartleby has seemingly elected to starve himself physically as well. Here we might again note how "Bartleby" contains eerily similar elements to Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" (1922). Like the titular character of this short story who dies of starvation in his cage, Bartleby wastes away because he can find nothing to emotionally and spiritually nourish him. Construed allegorically, Bartleby's profession as a scrivener reinforces how he has less been living than monotonously copying or imitating the act of life itself. Tragically and paradoxically, Bartleby seems to have hungered for a realized, meaningful existence that he had been unable to define or envision. Seemingly bred and conditioned to have been an instrument or tool of society, Bartleby wastes away precisely because he hungers for a sense of emotional and spiritual transcendence that he finds himself unable to achieve. In this respect, Bartleby would remain a total enigma were it not for the chilling "little item of rumour" (63) that the narrator imparts at the conclusion of his tale:

The report was this: that Bartleby has been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in the administration. Dead letters! Does not this sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters and assorting them for the flames? For by the cartload they are annually burned. Sometimes from out the folded paper the clerk takes a ring—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a banknote sent in swiftest charity—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more, pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death. (64)

In reading this passage, one is struck by the bleak portrait it offers of the often trivial clerical roles that individuals are relegated to within the bureaucratized realm of urban existence. Terminated from his position in the Dead Letter Office due to a

change in management, Bartleby goes on to take up an equally mundane position as a scrivener in the narrator's proto-cubicized Wall Street office.

- 47 Notably, this passage also contains stylistic elements that foreshadow later literary developments, thereby attesting to Melville's status as a historically innovative literary craftsman. Reading it, one is apt to think of Kafka's evocative depictions of alienation in *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926), Albert Camus's writings on the absurdity of human existence, and Joseph Heller's masterful depictions of the perils of bureaucracy gone mad in *Catch-22* (1961). While "Bartleby" today registers as a discernibly protomodernist experimental reaction against the popular aspects of Victorian realism and sentimentality that had dominated the literary marketplace of Melville's era, the story's conclusion is marked by a discernibly protopostmodern quality given its apparent sardonic critique of the narrator's unquestioned Humanist ideals. Reflecting on his report of Bartleby's life, the narrator concludes by remarking, "Ah, Bartleby. Ah humanity!" (64). His remarks suggest that he has once again retreated into his sheltered psychosocial reality by invoking his Humanist rhetoric, for one senses that he has simply transformed his knowledge of Bartleby's plight into a sentimentalized ode of self-righteously proclaimed sympathy for this bygone figure.

- 48 Commenting on postmodernism in their book, *Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* (1997), literary critics Ross Murfin and Supria M. Ray write,

Much of postmodernist writing reveals and highlights the alienation of individuals and the meaningless of human existence. Postmodernists frequently stress that humans desperately (and ultimately unsuccessfully) cling to illusions of security to forget and conceal the void over which their lives are constructed. (297)

Certainly, this passage provides an apt summation of a post-WWII literary and cultural phenomenon that "Bartleby" seems to have anticipated, for by absorbing Bartleby's tragic tale into his own Humanist repertoire, the narrator avoids confronting and acknowledging the inherently cruel, unjust society that he inhabits. When he remarks, "Ah, Bartleby! Ah humanity," we can imagine him cradling a glass of brandy or port on a chilly evening as he sits comfortably ensconced in a private gentleman's club.

Parting Reflections

- 49 What are we to ultimately make of this bizarre tale? Considered in historical context, the story registers as a potential meditation on America's national failure to communicate during the mid-nineteenth century as the nation became increasingly divided by class warfare, racial strife over the deplorable practice of slavery, and sociogeographic tensions separating North from South. Rendered a capitalist tool in his role as a scrivener, Bartleby becomes the equivalent of a human automaton whose

banal labor alienates him from his spiritual and emotional dimensions, thereby facilitating his alienation from society at large. Commenting on this very phenomenon in her essay, Weinstein writes,

The presumably intellectual, promisingly original activity of writing—that which is meant to be distinguished from working-class manual labor—takes on the structure of mechanical reproduction ruinous to the minds and bodies of workers. Writing, as it is practiced in the law office, turns out to be the most manual labor imaginable. (214–15)

Unable to articulate or fathom an existence apart from the charitable yet self-interested narrator, Bartleby remains locked in a master-slave dynamic with him. This situation is rendered all the more cruel by the narrator's otherwise kind gestures, which prevent Bartleby from coming to a true understanding of the fundamentally unjust socioeconomic foundation of their relationship. To this end, we might move ahead in history to Oscar Wilde's meditations on slavery in his essay, "Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891), where he writes, "Just as the worst slave-owners were those who were kind to their slaves, and so prevented the horror of the system being realised by those who suffered from it, and understood by those who contemplated it [...] the people who do the most harm are the people who try to do the most good" (1).

50 To be sure, there was widespread American sociopolitical consternation at the time Melville was writing "Bartleby." Given how America was founded on idealistic Enlightenment principles pertaining to notions of democracy and equality, the nation's increasingly heated mid-nineteenth century debates surrounding burgeoning class conflict and the then ongoing injustice of slavery pointed towards a country riven by antagonism and discord. Construed in this sense, Bartleby and the narrator's inability to establish a relationship oriented towards genuine interpersonal communicative exchange gestures towards larger macrocosmic concerns about America's failure to communicate as a nation. Accordingly, such concerns are underscored by Bartleby's former position in the Dead Letter Office, where unrecieved missives are sent to be burned and destroyed.

51 If "Bartleby" can be read as a meditation on an American project gone awry due to a national failure to communicate, it can also be read as Melville's self-reflexive meditation on writing and his own literary career. Obviously, there are connections that can be drawn between the Dead Letter Office in "Bartleby" and Melville's thwarted literary ambitions in the wake of the publication of his novels *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852), which had failed to find the popular readerships of Melville's earlier novels. Registering as a communicative dead zone where unrecieved and thus undeliverable letters are relegated for incineration; the Dead Letter Office also conceivably registers as Melville's veiled commentary on his own failure

to communicate with a mass American readership during his later years. In this respect, Bartleby's preference to not perform his copying duties can be equated to Melville's then burgeoning desire to write literary works that were not mere stylistic copies or imitations of the popular fiction that had resonated with mass Victorian-era sensibilities. It is here, of course, that "Bartleby" registers another discernibly proto-postmodern flourish, for a hallmark of postmodern literature is its metafictionality, which functions as a meditation on the very process of writing itself.

52 Never the dogmatist, Melville slyly avoids proposing doctrinaire solutions to the varied socioeconomic ills that "Bartleby" unveils. In keeping with my observations about the proto-postmodern characteristics of "Bartleby," we might say that the story evinces a skepticism towards metanarratives. Indeed, between Bartleby's directionless desire for emancipation from the drudgeries of monotonous clerical labor and the narrator's paternalistic, self-serving demeanor, the story leaves readers with no viable solutions to the social quagmire it delineates. What it does gesture towards in microcosm, however, is a modernizing America overshadowed by an antiquated, paternalistic socioeconomic order that could no longer meet the challenges of the day.

53 And yet, in delineating this issue, Melville was clearly not advocating violent insurrection. Well-read and well-traveled, he seems to have been too much a student of history and human difference to place unquestioning faith in the supposedly unifying power of revolutionary bloodshed. If anything, "Bartleby" seems to express a latent yearning for a form of communicative transcendence. In short, while Melville himself possessed a discernibly egalitarian spirit, he also seems to have yearned for Whitmanesque multitudes in ways that make it difficult to align him with any binding political orthodoxy.^[6] Thus, while he clearly identified with the laboring classes and was adamantly opposed to slavery as well as Native American dispossession and slaughter, he also seems to have been skeptical of Manichean-style politics that favored antagonistic conflict over agonistic dialogue.^[7] As Denis Berthold notes in his essay "Democracy and its Discontents (2006), "Melville dramatized his political views as debates among competing personae rather than as a consistent ideology" (154).^[8]

54 In evocatively conveying the alienating, psychosocially divisive conditions of modernity in "Bartleby," Melville also gave birth to a prophetic, enduring work that was ahead of its time given its foreshadowing of later developments in modernist, existential, and postmodern literature. Despite facing a diminishing literary reputation at the time of the publication of "Bartleby" publication, Melville would soldier on, publishing the novels *Israel Potter* (1854) and *The Confidence-Man* (1857), which were critical and commercial failures. Indeed, if "Bartleby" registers a discernible proto-postmodern strain, the *Confidence-Man* reads as though it is a contemporary postmodern work. Its marked resistance to coherent interpretation combined with its playfully invective depiction of the elusive meaning of language is prone to make one

think that it was written by a disciple of Jacques Derrida rather than by a nineteenth-century writer.

- 55 An essentially unrecognized literary genius throughout his writing career, Melville seems to have grown increasingly defiant in his later years when it came to conforming to the literary mainstream. In the aftermath of the dismal sales and negative critical reception of *The Confidence-Man*, Melville redirected his creative energies towards poetry and crafted his epic poem *Clarel* (1876), a complex meditation on the Holy Land, which Hardwick eloquently terms an act of sheer literary “defiance” that was tantamount to a “scream for the scaffold” (154). Accordingly, *Clarel* was published to total public indifference, selling about a third of its edition of 350 copies, with the rest being pulped three years later (Delbanco 287).
- 56 His once promising literary reputation faded, Melville would spend the years 1866 to 1885 working as an inspector in the New York City Custom House before finally being freed from the monotony of his duties via family inheritances. By all accounts, this nearly twenty-year period marked a dark time of personal and professional frustration in Melville’s life. By the time he died in 1891 at the age of seventy-two, he had faded into virtual obscurity and was remembered only for the popular seafaring yarns he had penned during his youth. Sadly, the *New York Times* botched his obituary and listed his first name as Henry. Summarizing Melville’s rather evident fall from his youthful period of literary grace in the conclusion of her book, Hardwick eloquently writes, “[T]his ornament and pride of our culture was to end his days with a sigh, a resigned, bearable, pedestrian loneliness” (155).
- 57 And yet, the passage of time has given birth to an ongoing “Melville Revival” that began with the publication of Raymond Weaver’s book *Herman Melville: Man, Mariner and Mystic* (1921), which gave way to a widespread critical reappraisal of Melville’s works, including his then unpublished novella *Billy Budd*, which was posthumously released to great critical adulation in 1924. Although at the time of Melville’s death “Bartleby” was recalled, if at all, as an interesting literary curio, this literary missive has endured and is today regarded as one of Melville’s greatest works.
- 58 During his final years, Melville almost certainly viewed himself as having failed to communicate with American readers. In this respect, there is great irony in the fact that he is today regarded as one of the greatest of American writers. Melville’s works today resonate with readers throughout the world, and “Bartleby” in particular has found new resonances throughout the years. Most recently, the story has been read in relation to Occupy Wall Street and the Trump era.^[9] “Bartleby,” it seems, will be with us so long as there are readers. Though Melville may have seen parallels between the Dead Letter Office and his then declining literary career when he was writing “Bartleby,” the story has proven an enduring, majestic missive indeed.

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Notes

[1] As literary critic Sharon Talley notes in her book, *Student Companion to Herman Melville* (2007), “Bartleby” enjoyed “popularity” with readers of its era (85). Writing in her essay, “Melville and the Marketplace” (2005), Sheila Post notes, “Melville’s tales became so popular with *Putnam’s* readers that the author’s work became the trademark for the magazine” (120).

[2] Although *Redburn* is a good book that provides an interesting, quasi-biographical account of elements from the early years of Melville’s own life, Melville would later disown it, claiming that it had been “written for tobacco” (qtd. in Hardwick 20). In rejecting *Redburn*, Melville was likely expressing his dismay at having temporarily

strayed from his artistic ambitions to write a work geared towards more popular reading tastes of the era.

[3] Historicizing America's early nineteenth-century democratic exceptionalism in his book *Myth of American Exceptionalism* (2009), the journalist and historian Godfrey Hodgson notes, "Nowhere else in the early nineteenth century, did so many citizens own land and other assets that conferred full citizenship. Public education was more generally available in the early decades of the United States than in many parts of Europe. Ideology, franchise, landowning, and public education: American achievement in those four areas are enough to make a strong claim for American exceptionalism in the first half of the nineteenth century" (37).

[4] By invoking the notion of a capital-H "Humanism," I mean to draw a distinction between a hubristic Humanism that considers humanity to be the center of everything and a humanism that lucidly recognizes humanity's frailties and limitations via a memento mori tradition (in my opinion, humanism properly understood). For a good understanding of this latter humanist tradition, see my comments on Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* in my 2019 *Fast Capitalism* article, "Solace of the Sojourn" (145–46).

[5] Upon discovering that Bartleby is inhabiting his office, the narrator associates him with the living dead and notes that his disposition is marked by a "cadaverously gentlemanly nonchalance" (29).

[6] I am here thinking of Walt Whitman's following lines in his poem "Song of Myself" (1855): "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself; / (I am large, I contain multitudes)." (1323–25).

[7] As political theorist Chantal Mouffe notes in her book, *For a Left Populism* (2018), "[t]he agonistic confrontation is different from the antagonistic one, not because it allows for a possible consensus, but because the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate" (91).

[8] Here we might think of the views of another great American Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who writes the following in his poem "Self-Reliance" (1841): "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesman and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with the shadow on the wall" (138).

[9] For work on "Bartleby" and the Occupy Wall Street movement, see Regina Dilden's essay, "The Original Occupy Wall Street" (2012); Lee Edelman's essay, "Occupy Wall Street" (2013); and Russ Castronovo's essay, "Occupy 'Bartleby'" (2014). For work on "Bartleby" and Trump, see John Feffer's essay, "The Case for Non-Cooperation with Trump" (2016) and Ariel Dorfman's essay, "What Herman Melville Can Teach Us About the Trump Era" (2017).

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