

A Guide to Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

Steven T. Ryan

Let's begin with possibly the best dash in American literature:

I seldom lose my temper; much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages; but I must be permitted to be rash here and declare, that I consider the sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Master in Chancery, by the new Constitution, as a – premature act; inasmuch as I had counted upon a life-lease of the profits, whereas I only received those of a few short years. But this is by the way. (Melville, "Bartleby" 636)

This passage is best read aloud with crescendo until the abrupt cessation at the dash, breaking with the calm, modest suggestion of a "premature act." At this early moment in the story, Melville allows his lawyer-narrator to digress, but it certainly is no arbitrary digression by either Melville or his narrator. For the narrator, it is an irresistible digression, a side road he cannot avoid any time he ventures near the topic of the lost position. For Melville it is the early moment in which he reveals the internal battle that bubbles within this rather ordinary businessman. It is equally important that the narrator nearly loses his temper and that he does not do so. A man whose pride is based upon his "prudence" and "method" (636) cannot permit rage to take control. Yet from this moment we know his self-image is contradicted by a more complex and more conflicted personality than he is willing to accept. We also have our first clue as to what will propel him into a highly emotive state which he finds repugnant in himself and in others: he cannot tolerate losing something he "counted upon" (regularity) and hates to lose money (materialism). Throughout the story, these two factors are intertwined within the narrator's psyche. Both have to do with a sense of security based upon the object world but not upon object relationships, for the narrator is both a social man and a solitary man – social in the sense of his dependency upon a social system and wealth and solitary in the sense that he actually has no one and has nothing but the social construct of his office. He stands as Melville's accomplished man even if his accomplishments ring hollow.

Appreciation for Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" requires an appreciation for the narrator. This is the central reversal within the story. What is presented as a study of the title character is actually a study of the justifiably unnamed narrator. Assume for a moment that we are among the first readers of the story within the two 1853 installments of *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, each appearing without authorial credit. The first installment in particular gives us the voice of an amiable gentleman commonly associated with the sketch writing of authors like Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr., makes this association when he calls the narrator "a Crayonesque sketcher" (Bickley 29). The subtitle, "A Story of Wall-Street," does not necessarily shift our genre paradigm from sketch to story. The story opens as a leisurely invitation into the comfortable world of the narrator. As is common in sketch writing, the narrator is congenial and wants us to share his worldly experience. He suggests that he could entertain us with the accounts of any number of scriveners whom we would find "interesting and somewhat singular" but that instead he will opt to give us what he can of the "strangest" ("Bartleby" 635). When he then continues at a casual pace through the introduction of himself, his office, and his other employees, we, if among the original readers, would have to associate this leisurely pace more with the easy gait of sketch writing than the intensity of either sentimental or Gothic stories. The narrative voice of nineteenth-century sketch writing offers a sharp contrast to Poe's finest stories. Whimsy rules – we sense that the narrative sharing of life experiences may be enjoyed as long as we sit back and spend our time with a narrator who is refined, unpretentious, and worldly. In American literature the voice associates with Ben Franklin and Irving, but actually it dates back to the stylistic ease and syntactical purity of Addison and Steele. The narrator's introduction of himself constitutes an attempt to conform to the bemused persona of sketch writing. This is suggested by his self-portrait as an "unambitious lawyer," comfortable in "the cool tranquility of a snug retreat" (635).

Of course, the dash undermines his attempt to sell himself as the quintessence of ease and self-containment. He would like us to believe that we are sharing a highly civil and relaxed examination of a curiosity. This assumption is gradually subverted by our realization that the narrator is a haunted man. Just as he is compelled to fume over the lost Master of Chancery position, he also is compelled to recount the story of Bartleby, even if he has limited information and limited insight to help the reader plummet the depth of Bartleby's mystery. The narrator is in fact incapable of the wit commonly associated with the sketch writer. The wit of Melville passes through the narrator without the character's awareness. The importance of understanding the narrator cannot be overstressed. In the history of the short story, the characterization has more in common with Flaubert's later accomplishment with Félicité in "A Simple Heart" than with character portrayal within either the neoclassical or romantic conventions. Melville and Flaubert achieve their more complex characterizations similarly by teasing their readers with the potential of both satire and sentimentality but resisting the simplification inherent in either direction. On different occasions Melville's reader may laugh at the narrator's rationalization and smug self-assurance or may be

touched by his fundamental humanity. The crucial check to the reader's sense of superiority is the aching realization that we would be unlikely to do any better in dealing with Bartleby.

The Lawyer-Narrator

Critical arguments are common in reactions to the narrator and typically hinge upon the extent to which we either detach from him or identify with his frustrations. A good reading of the story requires an appreciation of his central position but does not require agreement as to whether he is closer to a satiric or a sentimental portrait. Melville does undermine his authority, but also permits the narrator as much humanity as we are likely to find in an employer. Consider, for example, the narrator's name-dropping as he points out that he worked for John Jacob Astor, who complimented his "prudence" and "method." The narrator admits that he loves to repeat the name "for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion" (636). The simile is the narrator's momentary poetic flourish and works well to express a love of sound. Then we realize that the simile is also dependent upon the assumption that the ring of bullion is a good sound for reasons that go well beyond the pure love of sound (as is the love of the musical name "John Jacob Astor"). Thus Melville takes us into the narrator's values simply through the choice of vehicle. Like his struggle to contain his temper, the narrator tries to disguise his love of wealth beneath his "unambitious" demeanor. Again, this does not reflect hypocrisy but rather the more common contrast between self-definitions and a larger, more complex reality that lies beneath.

Two important characteristics of the narrator are: (1) his defense of his own domain, and (2) his desire to rely upon a simplistic materialism in interpreting reality. These two are closely aligned, for it is in defense of his domain that his simplistic materialism often appears. We must first note how the narrator couches his professional choices in language that never suggests that such things as timidity and greed play any role in addition to his lack of vanity and his equanimity. His slanting becomes more extreme when he dismisses the "landscape painters" who would find his office deficient in "life" (636) and brags of the wall within ten feet of his windows, "black by age and everlasting shade" as "requiring no spy-glass to bring out its lurking beauties" (wit credited to Melville, not the straight-shooting narrator).

His early description of Turkey and Nippers, as will be true of his central treatment of Bartleby, reveals as much about the narrator and his world as about his employees. For example, note the description of Turkey's disruptive behavior in the afternoon as he "made an unpleasant racket with his chair; spilled his sand-box; in mending his pens, impatiently split them all to pieces, and threw them on the floor in a sudden passion; stood up and leaned over his table, boxing his papers about in a most indecorous manner" (637). Now note the similarity to Nippers's disruptive behavior in the morning:

Nippers could never get his table to suit him. He put chips under it, blocks of various sorts, bits of pasteboard, and at last went so far as to attempt an exquisite adjustment by final pieces of folded plotting paper. But no invention would answer. If, for the sake of easing his back, he brought the table lid at a sharp angle well up towards his chin, and wrote there like a man using the steep roof of a Dutch house for his desk: – then he declared that it stopped the circulation in his arms. If now he lowered the table to his waistbands, and stooped over it in writing, then there was a sore aching in his back. In short, the truth of the matter was, Nippers knew not what he wanted. Or, if he wanted any thing, it was to be rid of a scrivener's table altogether. (639)

Rid of the scrivener's table indeed. The similar discomfort and irritation reflected in both descriptions would suggest that the behavior has *something* to do with the work itself. If Turkey could actually afford to become a half-time employee, the narrator's recommendation that he reduce to such employment would make good sense, but the lawyer drops several clues as to the low pay of the scriveners, like his reference to "so small an income" (640). The long hours are suggested by the long days of Bartleby's diligent performance: "He ran a day and night line, copying by sunlight and by candle-light" (642). One may safely conclude that Turkey and Nippers often find these long hours of tedious copying within this stark setting unbearable. It's not surprising that the body and mind rebel in either the morning or afternoon.

However, the analysis of the narrator avoids this obvious interpretation. He considers the age and drinking habits of Turkey, then goes into greater detail in analyzing the "ambition and indigestion" of Nippers (638). In each case we are encouraged to believe that the weakness lies within the man's constitution. This is preparation for the narrator's attempt to interpret the odd behavior of Bartleby. The most striking moment occurs after Bartleby tells the narrator that "he had decided upon doing no more writing" (656). At this moment Bartleby is again in his "dead-wall revery" (656). The narrator is shocked and asks for a reason, to which Bartleby responds, "Do you not see the reason for yourself?" (656). The narrator's reaction is to look "steadfastly" at Bartleby (656). It is at this point that the narrator judges that the eyes are "dull and glazed" and concludes that Bartleby's "unexampled diligence in copying by his window for the first few weeks" has "temporarily impaired his vision" (656). The narrator is "touched" and concludes that Bartleby *should* abstain from writing (656). The narrator's response is an excellent example of how Melville gives the man his due while more quietly suggesting an undeniable level of obtuseness. What the narrator observes and his response to it are logical and humane. He's an employer who can see his employee as more than a machine and can even appreciate the difficulty of the work and potential damage incurred. At the same time, how very strange that the narrator reacts to the question, "Do you not see the reason for yourself?" by looking at Bartleby rather than where Bartleby is looking. *If* he were to look at the wall, the next question would have to be, "What do you see in that wall, Bartleby?" The narrator will never ask such a question because he will never go so far in sharing Bartleby's vision. Whatever Bartleby sees is more metaphysical than physical, and despite the lawyer's convenient, momentary ruminations on Jonathan Edwards and Joseph

Priestley – on will and necessity – he senses at some level the metaphysical risk and prefers not to plummet. In addition, whatever Bartleby sees is clearly too close to home; it implicates the narrator's own world in ways that extend well beyond a temporary impairment of physical vision. After all, the narrator truly is "an eminently *safe* man" (635). When he examines the weaknesses of Turkey and Nippers, he is telling us with some accuracy what he can see. While Melville is not contradicting him, he is inviting us to consider how carefully the narrator avoids implicating his own world and his own life in a way that may go well beyond "temporarily impairing" our vision.

In 1953 Leo Marx published the first in-depth analysis of "Bartleby," and his article has remained one of the most respected and quoted essays on the story. He builds upon the autobiographical connection between author and text which had been suggested since the 1920s Melville revival, but he offers a more extensive and perceptive analysis. He also takes a position that establishes a central debate in regard to the portrayal of the narrator. In the conclusion of his essay, Marx argues that on the one hand the narrator "does not understand Bartleby then or at any point until their difficult relationship ends" (Marx 606), yet, in the end, Marx sees the blades of grass mysteriously located in the Tombs as affirmation associated with the narrator's "deeply felt and spontaneous sympathy" (626). While Marx is well aware of the limitations of the narrator, noting that "Wall Street was American" (618) and that "the difference between Wall Street and the Tombs was an illusion of the lawyer's, not Bartleby's" (618), his final movement is to shift responsibility toward Bartleby as writer, noting that "Melville does not exonerate the writer by placing all the onus upon society" (620). While "Bartleby's state of mind may be understood as a response to the hostile world of Wall Street" (619), Marx sees Bartleby as Melville's "compassionate rebuke to the self-absorption of the artist" who rejects the bonds of mankind (620) and errs in his interpretation of the social world as equivalent to the natural state: "In his disturbed mind metaphysical problems which seem to be timeless concomitants of the conditions of man and problems created by the social order are inextricably joined, joined in the symbol of the wall" (619). Marx's reading seems to associate Melville's position with Hawthorne's frequent rebuke of the intellectual/writer who becomes isolated within his/her ego and loses his/her awareness of communal love. Thus the narrator may represent the social order with all of its weaknesses, but his final sympathy is like the blades of grass and offers the affirmation of community bonding – the ultimate redemption to which Bartleby is blind. Marx's view is reminiscent of Cleanth Brooks's New Critical approach to Faulkner. Within this view, society's flaws are dissected but are secondary to the flawed vision of the outcast who divorces himself from society. Thus the narrator is too blind at the intellectual level to appreciate what Bartleby reacts to within his social world; however, Bartleby is too stunted emotionally to appreciate the sympathy the narrator experiences through the redemptive power of nature.

Curiously, this ironic defense of the narrator surfaces frequently within the fifty-plus years of "Bartleby" criticism. For example, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock in 2003

offers a post-structural, linguistic-based analysis of “Bartleby” based upon Derrida’s idea “that every letter is potentially a ‘dead letter’” (Weinstock 23). According to Weinstock, “Bartleby’s ‘textualization,’ that is, the identification of him with an unreadable letter, points to the ways in which all human subjects are ‘texts,’ are socially constructed and endowed with meaning by virtue of their places within language and culture” (27). To Weinstock, the mystery of “Bartleby” “foregrounds lack, which is the nature of haunting, and in haunting, intimates that to be human is precisely to be haunted” (23). Thus Bartleby and his story “are lost – and dramatize the loss at the heart of language and life” (30). Yet, like Marx, in Weinstock’s final moment, he looks for redemption in the attempt of the hapless narrator’s struggle for comprehension: “What Bartleby compels the narrator to do is to tell the story of why he cannot tell the story of Bartleby” (40), and in doing so the lawyer-narrator’s “dead letter” becomes his “love letter,” which permits him to mourn the loss.

Weinstock uses the narrator’s entire narrative much as Marx fifty years earlier uses the narrator’s attempt to arouse hope in Bartleby through the image of grass in the Tombs. In each case, the critic offers affirmation through love, which suggests a final reversal of the positions of Bartleby and the narrator. Whether based upon the blades of grass or the telling process, the core of the interpretation derives from the assumption that the narrator’s final words “Ah Bartleby! Ah, humanity!” (“Bartleby” 672) constitute a true crescendo. Thus, regardless how blind the narrator is, he has progressed by the end of the story. Both interpretations posit love or the social bond as real despite the delusions of Wall Street and language. This does represent a viable but minority position within “Bartleby” criticism, as critical analysis is more likely to question the assumption that the story constitutes the narrator’s building to a higher level of love and/or awareness. The most extreme defense of the narrator occurs in Dan McCall’s “The Reliable Narrator” in his book, *The Silence of Bartleby*. McCall believes that twentieth-century critics often err in their analysis of supposedly unreliable narrators. Two major directions of twentieth-century interpretation, the existentialist and Marxist inspired, tend to see the wall as the central symbol in the story and doubt the narrator’s ability to see beyond the hegemony of his socially constructed, self-imposed prison.

The Wall

At the core of the story’s symbolism is the question, “What does Bartleby see in his dead-wall revery?” The importance of walls has frequently been analyzed, and justifiably so. The subtitle of the original publication is “A Story of Wall-Street.” Beyond the key image of Bartleby staring at the wall three feet outside his window is the narrator’s wall of windows that looks upon the “lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade” (636), the “ground glass folding-doors” that separate the narrator from his employees, the “high green folding screen” that the narrator “procured” to “entirely isolate Bartleby” from his sight, and finally Bartleby’s stay in the Tombs

with frequent references to the walls: "his face toward a high wall" (669), "took up a position fronting the dead-wall" (670), "the surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept all sound behind them" (671), and "Strangely huddled at the base of the wall, ... his head touching the cold stones" (671). Walls constitute a leitmotif, and how we see the story is inseparable from how we interpret the walls. An existential perspective builds upon Leo Marx's early analysis of "blankness" in relationship to the walls. More recent criticism has seen the wall images more as an expression of Wall Street, thus of capitalistic culture. Since the 1990s, much of the best criticism has focused on the historical context of walls/Wall Street, often with Marxist implications, offering sharp insights into the labor struggles in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Norman Springer's "Bartleby and the Terror of Limitation" (1965) and Kingsley Widmer's "Melville's Radical Resistance: The Method and Meaning of *Bartleby*" (1969) are excellent readings from an existential perspective. Springer's essay uses Leo Marx's equation of the wall and blankness but then departs from his position, arguing that "Blankness is the only truth" and that the narrator attempts to "make meaning where there is no meaning" (Springer 414). The nihilistic recognition associated with the blank wall negates any attempt on the narrator's part to appreciate Bartleby's condition. According to Springer, Bartleby "is a kind of wall without reason, incomprehensible and blank" (415). Springer does not deny that the narrator tries to penetrate this wall, but he argues that he backs off each time he comes close to seeing the wall for what it is (411). Rather than Leo Marx's contention that the narrator discovers the source of true affirmation ignored by Bartleby, Springer argues that the narrator is "limited, flawed, with a built-in protective device: his self-esteem" (413). Springer's view also contradicts Weinstock's argument that the lawyer's narrative constitutes an affirmative "love letter," for a human's "compassion can never be as large as the need for it" (415). Thus Springer substitutes, for the redemptive power of love, the recognition of nothingness. For Springer, the "dead-wall reverie" is an apt representation for an existential moment – "a choosing of nothing" and the power of the story lies within "the fully-made paradox of a preference for no thing" (416). This existential perspective places primary emphasis on two factors: choice as reflected in Bartleby's life of preference and the realization of nothingness or blankness as associated with the wall image.

Kingsley Widmer continues this focus on an existential perspective and defines the existentialist's attraction to Melville's story as based upon Melville's awareness of the "solitude and absurdity and nothingness we must face if we are to achieve authentic awareness" (Widmer 458). For Widmer, the wall and the lawyer are both at the source of Bartleby's existential recognition as the "walled-in lawyer" cannot see himself as associated with "the walls of gloom" (449). While Bartleby represents people who see "the larger isolation of man and frequent futility of his endeavours" (448), to Widmer the narrator represents the liberal American as "the blandly benevolent rationalist" (448). Such a man cannot deal with cosmic irrationality and recoils from "more ominous and nihilistic truths about the universe" (453). Widmer dismisses the

narrator's final exclamation as "a last sentimental gesture of the representative American confronted with the violation of his faith" (457).

Widmer presents his existential perspective as an opposition to the Marxist or more generally anti-capitalist view of the story. He dismisses such perspectives as inadequate in dealing with the story's complexity. According to Widmer, Melville's Wall Street works well as a "metaphysical metaphor of confinement and of barriers to understanding" but does not work as a propagandistic expression of abusive financial "power and manipulation" (447). Since *Bartleby* is indifferent to wealth, Widmer concludes that the story fails to target American capitalism and commercialism (446–7). Widmer's dismissal of a socioeconomic interpretation of "*Bartleby*" is only a more extreme expression of Leo Marx's argument that although "*Bartleby*'s state of mind may be understood as a response to the hostile world of Wall Street" (Marx 619), "Melville does not exonerate the writer by placing all the onus upon society" (620). Both in Leo Marx's 1953 context and Widmer's 1969 context the underlying implication of an anti-socioeconomic interpretation expresses opposition to Marxist critics, first the popular Marxist criticism of the 1930s opposed by the original New Critics and later the resurgence of Marxist criticism during the cultural revolutions of the 1960s. Of course, an existential interpretation need not dismiss a socioeconomic interpretation (no surprise to Jean-Paul Sartre), but one can easily understand the either/or logic that would see within *Bartleby*'s dead-wall revery *either* a recognition of the cosmic void (death, isolation, epistemological limitations, or the limits of love) *or* a confrontation with Wall Street as the ascending power of modern capitalism. Leo Marx's argument is that *Bartleby* *errs* in extending his interpretation of the wall *from* the socioeconomic to the existential: "What ultimately killed this writer was not the walls themselves, but the fact that he confused the walls built by men with the wall of human mortality" (622). However, few critics thereafter have been willing to argue that the story's meaning derives from *Bartleby*'s misinterpretation of the walls. Since 1970, most criticism argues that whatever *Bartleby* sees in the walls is real and extends beyond the vision of the narrator.

Although both Leo Marx and Widmer respond to or anticipate a Marxist interpretation of "*Bartleby*," the first developed Marxist view does not appear until Louise K. Barnett's article in 1974. However, since *Bartleby* lacks proletarian consciousness, Barnett sees him as the "alienated worker who, realizing that his work is meaningless and without a future, can only protest his humanity by a negative assertion" (Barnett 379). According to Barnett, *Bartleby* sees the natural world as "equally constrained in the Tombs and on Wall Street" as the "man-made wall is omnipresent" (384). This may seem similar to Leo Marx until we see how Barnett reverses Marx's interpretation of the redemptive blades of grass by arguing that when *Bartleby* is imprisoned and still in his dead-wall revery, "the narrator can patronize him once more and encourage him to make the best of it" (384).

James C. Wilson extends the Marxist argument in 1981 and, in so doing, clarifies the way in which the Marxist argument is likely to oppose the existential interpretations. According to Wilson, the narrator "exposes Wall Street and its new

religion of materialism, of which he and John Jacob Astor are members of a kind of priestly caste" (Wilson 338). Within the story, "this new religion posits money as its only value" (338). Thus, Bartleby's alienation and dehumanization result from the "prison of his socioeconomic system" (340). From an opposing perspective, Wilson, like Leo Marx, emphasizes the limitations of Bartleby's vision as he argues that Bartleby fails to make a connection "between his own individual alienation and the class alienation of the propertyless worker" (340). One might initially look at this statement and assume that Wilson has reached the same point as Leo Marx. However, the important distinction is that Leo Marx's Bartleby goes too far in giving meaning to the wall whereas Wilson's Bartleby does not go far enough. Whereas Marx's Bartleby makes the artist's mistake of extending his personal situation into "metaphysical problems which seem to be timeless concomitants of the condition of man" (Marx 619), Wilson's Bartleby lacks the capacity to connect his personal state and class struggle (Wilson 340). In both cases, Bartleby ends in despair, but the first is the isolated, egocentric artist while the second is the isolated, uninformed worker.

Naomi C. Reed summarizes a primary direction of "Bartleby" criticism in the past twenty years as she notes the movement of Marxist criticism from a "more thematic approach, which presents the story as illustrative of Marxist concepts, to rigorously historicist readings" (Reed 248). Since there is "no real evidence that Melville was familiar with Marx's writings at the time he composed 'Bartleby,'" the emphasis of Marxist criticism has shifted to labor disputes in New York at the time of the story's publication (248). Reed's article (2004) extends the excellent scholarship of writers like David Kuebrich (1996), Richard R. John (1997), and Barbara Foley (2000) in providing a historical context for "Bartleby" that reveals Melville's awareness "that Wall Street was a hotbed of labor activism" and that he "knew of political debates about the rights of workers" (Reed 248). It is within this context that the story has been reevaluated. Kuebrich's article is particularly insightful in its application of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony to the perspective of the narrator. According to Kuebrich, the lawyer is "self-deceived by the moral categories developed by nineteenth-century U.S. Christian culture as it accommodated itself to capitalism" (Kuebrich 396). Kuebrich believes that Melville uses the narrator to investigate the cultural denial of contradictions between exploitative self-interest and Christian values (396). Hegemony is thus at the core of the lawyer's narrative, and the narrator expects his readers to accept that capitalism and "its ideological underpinnings are not subject to question because they are commensurate with the rational or natural ordering of society" (404). I have elsewhere analyzed these "underpinnings" as derivations of the central principles proposed by Cicero in *The Offices*, thus explaining Bartleby's troubled gazing upon the bust of Cicero over the narrator's head.

Whether from the existential or Marxist direction, the past forty years have placed a great deal of emphasis upon the original subtitle, "A Story of Wall-Street." As an image of philosophical "blankness" or a study of socioeconomic systemic abuse, the

world of walls has come to be seen as central to Melville's communication. Critics gaze upon the wall with Bartleby and typically question the narrator's inability or unwillingness to do so.

Communication

The one story element that receives as much attention as walls in the study of "Bartleby" is communication. We are introduced into the world of those who copy legal documents. In the epilogue, the narrator offers the rumor that Bartleby previously worked in the Dead-Letter Office. In the Tombs, the grub-man mistakes Bartleby for a "gentleman forger" ("They are always pale and genteel-like, them forgers" ["Bartleby" 670]). Once we consider these references to written documentation, we next consider the lawyer's narrative as another form of documentation. The final consideration becomes Bartleby's *refusal* to copy and his reticence versus the narrator's verbosity. We may then ask ourselves: who communicates more effectively, the narrator or Bartleby? How may more language say less and less language say more? How may silence become expression and expression become silence?

Early criticism was quick to equate Melville's biography with Bartleby's fate. Particularly stressed was his reaction to the public reception of *Pierre* since Melville was accused of insanity. Details such as the narrator's suspicion that Bartleby's diligence has caused damage to his eyes tempt the reader to consider the parallel to Melville's comparable diligence and similar family fears. Biographical encoding to Bartleby as resistant copyist may occur as an equivalent to Melville's resistance to commercial writing. Susan Weiner in her 1992 essay takes this parallel to a deeper level that asks us to consider Melville's reaction to language itself: "By the time Melville completed *Pierre*, he had become profoundly skeptical about the ability of language to penetrate beneath the surface of appearance and reveal something about the mystery underlying reality" (Weiner 91). Weiner builds upon the post-structural perspective of John Carlos Rowe (1982) and others when she focuses on semiotics and sees "Bartleby" as a story about language and its limitations: "The act of writing, which is an assertion of originality in *Pierre*, has been reduced to copying in 'Bartleby.' Similarly, the language of law has also become so rigid as to inhibit its flexibility in dealing with the most pressing conflicts of the period, particularly slavery" (92). Weiner is appropriately fascinated by the whole concept of "copy" from the epistemological doubt that may question the existence of creativity to the legal underpinnings of culture.

This range is reminiscent of the previously discussed opposition of existential and Marxist perspectives as it asks us to consider whether the focus is more on the human condition or the culture. In regard to culture, Weiner examines the law office and the specific work of the narrator as it reflects upon the larger culture: "By repetitiously writing the documents that encoded the laws of ownership or origin, the lawyer becomes a key element in maintaining the structure of the entire legal framework" (104). The problem at this level is the way in which law and language provide the

framework for culture: "the written legal document is the surface expression of a reality that is decontextualized and refuses to consider any adaptation to special circumstances of an individual case" (105). Weiner presents cultural law as a language-based process through which reality is squeezed into ill-fitting boxes: "Exactitude substantiates truth and the copy comes to stand for the original" (105). This is a useful way of approaching the narrator's hegemony as well as officially documented law. Thus the "copyist" becomes all who repetitively document or "force" a reality and in so doing create a substitute for "what landscape painters call 'life'" ("Bartleby" 636).

However, a movement from the more sociological to the epistemological occurs when Weiner questions the human's, including the writer's, dependence upon language: "Melville undermines the whole notion of an abstract truth that can be contained in the finite material of language" (Weiner 105). Therefore, language itself becomes the ultimate source of deception: "Language is put to the task of creating surface illusion to stand for meaning" (111). One may thus argue that beneath the actual source of meaning (language) lies meaninglessness or the void. At this point, the implications of Weiner's argument carry the reader from protest of cultural rigidity to the void that lies beneath – in other words, again from the popular Marxist argument that Melville exposes the dangerous artifices of capitalistic class structure and ownership (the narrator's office and its production) to the existential realization that the word (or the wall) is also indicative of the blank/nothingness that underlies all meaning. Here again the suggestion is *not* that Bartleby's reticence is a reflection of his opposition to oppression and to his *inability* to see the true meaning that may lie beneath oppression (Leo Marx's compassion, Wilson's Marxist utopia, Weinstock's love letter), but rather the possibility that the final silence of the dead-wall reverie is the final truth – death, meaninglessness. In this case, Bartleby's "language" of truth must move toward silence, just as we may assume that the more the narrator speaks/writes, the less he says. This possibility places Melville closer to Samuel Beckett than to any writer of his own generation.

Bartleby

A casual reading of "Bartleby" (or what one usually deals with in the college classroom) suggests that the first topic to consider in a discussion of the story is Bartleby himself – who is he and what is wrong with him? If the history of "Bartleby" criticism teaches us anything, it is the realization that consideration of the character of Bartleby is better left to a much later phase of analysis. The story's narrator misleads us into thinking that this is "A Study of Temperament" to quote a Kate Chopin subtitle and that the subject is Bartleby. Ironically, to the extent to which it is a study of temperament, the subject is the narrator. One can say very little with assurance about Bartleby's temperament. We know that the narrator knows little about Bartleby and understands him even less. Bartleby is the cipher that haunts the narrator and the void within which we all place our separate meanings.

“Haunting” is a concept that comes up often in “Bartleby” criticism. I once suggested that the story disguises a Gothic structure and that, within that structure, the narrator is haunted by a ghost – the perfect ghost intended to haunt this particular man (thus Bartleby’s initial diligence and gentlemanly demeanor). The comparison I used was Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and I still think this is useful if one is thinking in terms of a fictive construct and how characters play roles within such a construct. For example, if a student should ask why Bartleby will not leave the narrator’s office, I would ask in turn why does not Roderick leave the House of Usher, and why does not Hester Prynne leave her New England village. Part of the explanation lies within the understanding of a Gothic construct – the haunted house or its equivalent – which envisions the human edifice as inescapable. Bartleby does not leave for the same reason the narrator shows up at the office on Sunday morning. The Gothic world is claustrophobic; to be haunted is to find no exit. To the extent to which all roads are closed, the human is held within a human edifice that associates with human dreams: the House of Usher is patriarchal lineage, her New England village is the City of God, and the narrator’s office is the brave new world of American business. Nightmare derives from dream; without the dream, there is no true nightmare. Melville’s mastery in “Bartleby” can be seen in watching the narrator’s world, his “snug retreat,” disintegrate, and Bartleby is the catalyst for this disintegration. The narrator’s world, more a construct of mind than a specific place, does not literally crumble into a tarn, but as long as the narrator cannot stop telling his story, his office must remain what it is and not what he would like it to be. Like the House of Usher and Hester’s village, it is a place that sucks away life rather than rejuvenating life (to be healed from the imagined effects of the Dead-Letter Office).

We will never be fully satisfied to see Bartleby as mere catalyst, nor should we be. We follow the clues of the dead-wall reverie, the repetitive “prefer not to,” or the gazing upon the bust of Cicero to glean what we can of a human character. We know that what we are given is suggestive and fragmentary, and from this, we either try to make a whole picture, or we conclude that the suggestive and fragmentary always is the whole picture (a very postmodern picture that questions the concept of identity).

For the sake of argument, I would like to consider the moment in which the narrator returns to his “old haunt,” finds Bartleby sitting upon the banister, and directs Bartleby back into the office they have previously shared. The conversation that follows deserves more attention than it normally receives given that the “unwonted wordiness” of Bartleby “inspired” the narrator (667). Essentially, the narrator introduces five possibilities of employment, followed by his invitation into his home. Bartleby rebuffs each idea and the final invitation with slight variations in his rejections. Of course, the narrator’s expression of “unwonted wordiness” is comical given that Bartleby’s six statements total one hundred words, but, relatively speaking, this is a verbal explosion from Bartleby. It does seem clear that we are to believe that Bartleby is actually thinking about each option, as though the narrator may hit upon the final solution that could bring Bartleby out of his stupor. The five options are:

(1) "re-engage in copying," (2) "a clerkship in a dry-goods store," (3) "a bar-tender's business," (4) "travel through the country collecting bills for the merchants," and (5) "going as a companion to Europe, to entertain some young gentleman with your conversation" (667). Wilson's Marxist perspective is one of the few analyses of this list. Wilson sees all but the last as "Wall Street approved forms of slavery" while "the last is simply ludicrous" (Wilson 344). The key to Wilson's response is expressed in the statement that these proposals reveal "the narrow limits of the lawyer's imagination" (343). This is logical and suits the Marxist perspective. The restrictions and even the absurdity of the narrator's list then mirror the narrowness of his own world. *He* can envision nothing beyond menial, dull jobs that match those of his own employees or positions that are absurd mismatches for Bartleby's character.

However, we might switch our focus and examine instead Bartleby's responses. He would "prefer not to make any change," sees "too much confinement" in a clerkship, would not like "at all" bartending despite not being "particular," would prefer to do "something else" rather than collect bills, finds being a companion on a Grand Tour lacking in something "definite" and would like to be "stationary," and to the final offer of the narrator's home, would "prefer not to make any change at all" (667). Despite what the narrator sees as maddening contradictions (How can one *choose* such stasis, yet dislike confinement?), Bartleby's responses do suggest that he is trying to discover something that will satisfy him, something that he may find rewarding. He has become resistant to change and movement, yet does not see himself as "particular." The narrator is not necessarily justified in equating "confinement" with desire to remain "stationary" or avoid change. This may suggest that Bartleby truly sees an unpleasant change in his confinement in the Tombs. One may argue that Bartleby vaguely envisions possibilities for an alternative life, but such possibilities do not surface within the lawyer's list.

We must then ask ourselves: is this because of "the narrow limits of the lawyer's imagination," or is this because such vague possibilities are not of this world? To say that Bartleby is not at home in the world can express Bartleby's individual frailty (suggesting a variety of psychological readings) or that the frailty of the narrator's world is defined by the narrator's limits or that the frailty of physical existence is expressed by the list. Any one of these possibilities can suggest a way of approaching the character of Bartleby: victim of himself, victim of capitalism, victim of life. I do see importance in this list mainly because within the fictive construct of the story, it is Melville's opportunity to extend to a world outside the narrator's office and the Tombs. In doing so, does he at least hint at an exit, an alternative to the stultifying environment of the narrator? I believe the answer is "no" – nothing within the framework of the story suggests such an exit to the Gothic edifice. The most revealing option is bill collecting in the country, which the narrator sees as a great opportunity for improving Bartleby's health (667). The "thud" to any romantic suggestion of nature's healing power is bill collecting – yet one more image of culture's dead documentation. "Stationary" and "definite" both suggest that Bartleby longs for permanence, for an absolute or ideal state, for the refreshing fixed point. The lawyer would

seem to share this distant dream, given his frustration over losing a “life-lease of the profits” as Master of Chancery and having to settle for “a few short years” (636). This may suggest that *Bartleby*’s dream is not of this world and that his state is similar to Hamlet’s. However, the other options in interpreting *Bartleby* remain viable. For example, when the narrator finally offers his home as a refuge, some critics see this as the narrator’s grand gesture – a moment in which he breaks through his own limitations – but to view it in this way, one must ignore what the narrator’s home would be. He is the nameless bachelor whose home can offer nothing but momentary respite from his *real* life which is in his office. Despite the obvious generosity of the narrator, can this possibly be seen as an alternative for *Bartleby*? I can see no difference between bill collecting in the country and living in the narrator’s home: both introduce particular dream images that are based upon the redemptive force of nature and the hearth, but both are negated by the qualifiers. Yet, here again, no argument can be settled between Marxist/existentialist readings. The story apparently offers no exit from the confines of a quiet, entropic nightmare, possibly because Melville has constructed the story to express what he sees as the inevitable limitations of human existence, or it may be because Melville has successfully limited the story to the restrictive vision of the narrator. So in the end we have returned to the wall and our shared gaze along with *Bartleby*.

Conclusion: On Teaching “*Bartleby*”

One of the finest critical essays ever written on American literature was Randall Jarrell’s study of Robert Frost’s “Home Burial.” In a careful textual reading, Jarrell explains how the text contrasts the positions of the husband and wife as they react to the death of their child. Although both positions are given their due, Jarrell clarifies how Frost has constructed his poem so as to demonstrate a very real, harsh worldliness within the husband and, in so doing, justify the wife’s recoil from him and his world. When I teach “Home Burial,” a class will often divide down the middle in its support of either the husband or the wife. When students defend the husband, they usually emphasize that he tries to communicate and to achieve intimacy whereas she doesn’t. My experience in teaching “*Bartleby*” is very similar. Classes will often divide evenly in their support of either the narrator or *Bartleby* and will argue their cases vehemently. Again, the lawyer scores points for trying. To be honest, I no longer encourage my students to take a position quickly in this regard. Although it can lead to lively discussion, once students take a position, they tend to dig in their heels. Instead, I prefer to read the lawyer’s opening description of himself and his office – including that wonderful dash. I believe students need to think about how the author undermines the narrator’s authority from the beginning of the story. (In my upper-division classes, I compare this to Melville’s treatment of Captain Delano in “Benito Cereno,” a man whose surprising survival reminds me of Mr. McGoo.) Once the reader has begun to grasp the complexity of the narrator’s character, then consideration of such

key matters as the symbolism of walls, the thematic treatment of communication, and the identity of Bartleby can better be considered. Of the wife's position in "Home Burial," Jarrell argues that Frost gives great weight to it, for there is something she has discovered that the reader is expected to contemplate. In other words, she goes where her husband cannot or will not go, and the reader is expected to share this deeper perception of the woman whose mourning has led her into a profound level of disillusionment. Yet, in the end, Jarrell notes that we can only follow her so far, for to follow her any further is to follow her into the grave. Thus, we are finally left holding back, ironically sharing something with the less perceptive husband. I would argue that in "Bartleby" our position is likely to be very similar. We can follow Bartleby by recognizing the limitations of the narrator. But at some point, we too must hold back and share our world with the narrator.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Barnett, Louise K. "Bartleby as Alienated Worker." *Studies in Short Fiction* 11 (1974): 379–85.
- Bickley, R. Bruce, Jr. *The Method of Melville's Short Fiction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1975.
- Foley, Barbara. "From Wall Street to Astor Place: Historicizing Melville's 'Bartleby.'" *American Literature* 72 (2000): 87–116.
- Jarrell, Randall. "Robert Frost's 'Home Burial.'" *The Third Book of Criticism*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1962. 191–231.
- John, Richard R. "The Lost World of Bartleby, The Ex-Officeholder: Variations on a Venerable Literary Form." *New England Quarterly* 70 (1997): 631–41.
- Kuebrich, David. "Melville's Doctrine of Assumption: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in 'Bartleby.'" *New England Quarterly* 69 (1996): 381–405.
- McCall, Dan. *The Silence of Bartleby*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989.
- Marx, Leo. "Melville's Parable of the Walls." *Sewanee Review* 61 (1953): 602–27.
- Melville, Herman. "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street." *Pierre, Israel Potter, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence-Man, Uncollected Prose, Billy Budd, Sailor*. New York: Library of America, 1984. 635–72.
- Reed, Naomi C. "The Specter of Wall Street: 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' and the Language of Commodities." *American Literature* 76 (2004): 247–73.
- Rowe, John Carlos. *Through the Custom-House: Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Modern Theory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.
- Ryan, Steven T. "Cicero's Head in Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener.'" *English Language Notes* 43 (2005): 116–33.
- . "The Gothic Formula of 'Bartleby.'" *Arizona Quarterly* 34 (1978): 311–16.
- Springer, Norman. "Bartleby and the Terror of Limitation." *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 80 (1965): 410–18.
- Weiner, Susan. *Law in Art: Melville's Major Fiction and Nineteenth-Century American Law*. New York: Peter Lang, 1992.
- Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew. "Doing Justice to Bartleby." *American Transcendental Quarterly* 17 (2003): 23–42.
- Widmer, Kingsley. "Melville's Radical Resistance: The Method and Meaning of *Bartleby*." *Studies in the Novel* 1 (1969): 444–58.
- Wilson, James C. "'Bartleby': The Walls of Wall Street." *Arizona Quarterly* 37 (1981): 335–46.