Looking Back to Old New York City in Herman Melville's "Bartleby"

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Abstract: Though "Bartleby, the Scrivener" takes place in the three-block area in and around the lawyer's Wall Street offices, the uptown attitudes toward city life of the suburbs inform the lawyer's relationships to his urban or downtown space. Wall Street stands as a central feature of the island city's history, taking its name from a physical wall built to protect the Dutch from the British and the Indians. As a result, Wall Street served to differentiate the suburban from the urban confines of the city. Through the position of the lawyer in the Master Chancery office on Wall Street and his esteem of Jacob Astor, Herman Melville examines how the lawyer's view of the city as hierarchical shapes the lawyer's disaffection from the lives of his idiosyncratic office copyists. But as Bartleby disrupts the customs at the Chancery, Melville alludes to Benjamin Franklin's own work as a pressman in the Watts Printing House in London. Franklin's and Bartleby's labors represent the vast distance between the craft culture of eighteenth-century London and the industrial democracy of antebellum New York City. I argue that Melville criticizes the spatial divide of the city wherein the uptown (private) and downtown (public) faces of the lawyer never amalgamate into a singular conscience. In exploring contrasting accounts of workers trapped in the city, I examine how the lawyer forms a melancholic sympathy with Bartleby that pulls him into the Egyptian gloom of the city. When the lawyer visits Bartleby in the Tombs, he sees the stark and brutal Pharoah-like top-down power structure of the Whig city dissevered from its Whiggish time's arrow of progress.

Keywords: Herman Melville; New York City; "Bartleby, the Scrivener"; Wall Street; labor history; United States nineteenth-century literature

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The Lawyer and the Whig City

Though "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" takes place in the three-block area in and around the lawyer's Wall Street offices, the uptown attitudes toward city life inform the lawyer's relationships to his urban or downtown space. Wall Street stands as a central feature of the island city's history, taking its name from a physical wall built to protect the Dutch from the British and the Indians. As a result, Wall Street served to differentiate the suburban from the urban confines of the city. In "Bartleby," Wall Street also has an imaginary barrier to hold back these unprincipled subversive forces from penetrating the idyllic suburbs, the habitat of the wealthy mercantile, banking, and legal class. The lawyer's fealty to that "principled" class above the downtown class of restive workers and laborers spotlights the lawyer's ancillary position as Master of Chancery (Holt 299).

After the Panic of 1837, the subsequent business recession, and the crash of the real estate market, property value was on the minds of everyone in 1841. This real estate fever ushered in a new New York. Those who bought during the Panic of 1837 would sell later at a great profit. The New York environmental historian Catherine McNeur states, "Many of the neighborhoods surrounding Union Square, Gramercy Park, and Madison Square would finally be realized in the mid-1840s" (McNeur 93). The emergence of these private enclaves of wealthy mansions and fashionable circles removed from the filth and stench of the downtown will be central to the lawyer's appointed position in the House of Chancery and its circulation of deeds and mortgages. Through the lawyer's story of Wall Street, Melville materializes this engine of class division and social inequality at the heart of the city.

Within the Chancery's walls, those at the top of this structural edifice and those at the bottom commingle and cross paths in the urbane signatory of the titles and deeds and the ramshackle bodies of the scriveners. Melville questions the great divide of wealth and privilege. The hierarchal structure of this monolithic Whig city of the 1840s is mirrored in the self-esteem of the lawyer who calls attention to his affiliations with John Jacob Astor in his salutation to the reader: "John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion. I will freely add, that I was not insensible to the late John Jacob Astor's good opinion" (Melville 14). The ringing repetition of the Astor name elevates this figure of early National "animal spirits" to the pinnacle of New York high society. After making money in the opium and fur trade, Astor sunk his fortune and later his China trade into what would become the perpetual money-making machine of Manhattan rents and leases. Astor bought the large garden farm at Vauxhall and leased the property to Delacroix to build Vauxhall Gardens as a "resort for fashionable New Yorkers that offered leafy walks, pavilions serving juleps and ice cream, bands, theatrical entertainments, and fireworks" (Burrows and Wallace 448). Once the lease was up in 1825, Astor extended Broadway through the property and sold the now fashionable lots at a great profit to wealthy citizens to escape the foul odors and rowdy streets of the downtown.

The lawyer of "Bartleby" journeys daily through this stretch of Broadway to his own home in the suburbs. This idea of home is central to the structure of feeling the lawyer constructs to separate his uptown (private) selfhood from his downtown (public) character. Though Melville omits any specific reference to the home's location other than that he travels up Broadway to reach his dwelling place, this hierarchical division is central to Melville's pointed criticism of Wall Street and its us-versus-them model of New York society.

By 1839 Astor became the richest man in America, and his real estate business provided a lucrative cash source that "employed a sizable staff of rental agents, contractors, accountants, bookkeepers, and lawyers" (Burrows and Wallace 449). The narrator of "Bartleby" sees himself through Astor's rather officious performance report, taking great satisfaction in playing his part in this business class. Wyn Kelley in *Melville's City: Literary and Urban Form in Nineteenth-Century New York* (1996) examines the housing issues that inform the ambiguity of Bartleby's occupation of the lawyer's leased Wall Street office and the instability of tenancy in New York. Kelley asserts that the lawyer unwittingly falls under Astor's control as a "*safe* man" lacking the entrepreneurial energies of his rivals and competitors in the real estate market: "he *is* insensible, at least to the degree that he does not recognize how his prudence and method serve Astor's ends rather than his own" (203). But even as "an eminently *safe* man" (Melville 14), the lawyer is a man in the orbit of John Jacob Astor and in contact with if not in reach of the upper reaches—the top ten thousand—of the financial edifice of New York.

The lawyer of "Bartleby" looks back from the mid 1850s to the extinct political and institutional structures of Old New York. The Master Chancery office on Wall Street was abolished in 1846 as part of an outdated court system. In addition, the American Whig Party that the lawyer would have been a part of was dissolved after the efforts to put forth an 1848 presidential nomination exposed the division within the Whig Party, both in New York between the Steward and Tweed "progressives" and the "conservatives" over "nativism, state constitutional revision, Anti-Rentism, black suffrage, and what seems to conservatives the increasingly radical antislavery stance of the Weed-Steward wing," and in the national party between the Northern Whigs and Southern Whigs over the support of the Democratic Party's expansion of slavery at the end of the very popular Mexican War (Holt 299). This divide would fracture the Whig Party after the Compromise of 1850 and end the Whig Party after the emergence of the Republican Party in the election of 1852.

Within the Whig city, the lawyer has a sense of his material position in the "vital middle class" and has strong association with the politics and culture of the Whigs in bringing together varied economic interests through shared principles of good business practice (Burrows and Wallace 731). As a reaction to a populist Jacksonian America, the Whig Party formed on the principles of modernization and favored pro-business policies to mobilize a class of highly skilled and educated professionals, financers, entrepreneurs, industrialists, and commercially oriented farmers and large-scale planters to compete on the world stage (Holt 299-301). The Whig city is a material representation of the deeds, financing, contracts, and wages that build it. The invisible hand of Adam Smith's market economy materializes in the 1845 *American Whig Review* article "The Mystery of Iniquity" as the "whole hand" that "hews or places the materials of the structures of wealth and pride" (443). In the Whig city, everyone who holds to principled business benefits from the nexus of capital and labor. Each in his own part creates the superstructure that defines levels of achievement and class affiliations within the very same hierarchy. The businessman, jurist, banker, builder, merchant, tradesman, and laborer all have a hand in the build-up of the city, and all mutually benefit from these relationships.

When Bartleby, the copyist, is situated behind the screen, the lawyer describes the verticality of the city:

> I placed his desk close up to a small side-window in that part of the room, a window which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain grimy back-yards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light. Within three feet of the panes was a wall, and the light came down from far above, between two lofty buildings, as from a very small opening in a dome. (Melville 19)

The lawyer returns to the shaft of light as a symbol of this top-down hierarchical structure. The lawyer emphasizes the vertical build-up of the city as a demonstrable symbol of its expansion beyond anyone's comprehension. The vantage point to see and comprehend the scope of the city is beyond the lawyer's narrow view. He must hold a Whiggish belief in the capital sum of the interrelationships that make the city in its own image. In the enclosed world of "Bartleby," one can surmise that the light of Astor shines down upon Wall Street as if a sort of divine ordination upon the pantheon of the gods of finance.

The lawyer gestures toward Romanticism—a nature that is at once beatific and awful—even in its jarring absence in this story of Wall Street. Yet this nature is inaccessible to his copyists Nippers and Turkey. The copyists' disenfranchisement from this ontological summit establishes a hierarchy of the spirit in the office. The lawyer's uptown residence locates a private life separate from the materialism of the downtown. Though there is no direct reference to where his home is located, the lawyer's movement down Broadway to his office reaffirms the urbanity of Wall Street in contrast to the sub-urbanity of his dwelling place. The disparity between uptown and downtown in New York is brought to the fore in Henry James's novel *Washington Square* set in the 1840s, which characterizes the push of the middle class to seek out new properties beyond Washington Square—itself once a wealthy refuge from the urban downtown. James describes uptown Manhattan as a world apart from the downtown or lower Manhattan, "where the extension of the city began to assume a theoretic air, where poplars grew beside the pavement (when there was one), and mingled their shade with the steep roofs of desultory Dutch houses, and where pigs and chickens disported themselves in the gutter" (212). The lawyer holds this proximity to what James identifies of Old New York's "rural picturesqueness" as a structure of his private life. This intimate relationship to the picturesque is a structure of his private life. This domain of the rustic is immediate and knowable. The lawyer can walk up the street into a lane reminiscent of an Old Dutch village and distance himself from the petty squabbles of his downtown office. He retains an interior sense of this picturesque as an antidote to the daily pressures of his office and the trying temperaments of his scriveners.

Turkey, a creature of the city, casts himself as kindred soul of the lawyer even as his efforts to hold onto his position in the office become increasingly desperate:

> "But the blots, Turkey," intimated I.
> "True, but, with submission, sir, behold these hairs! I am getting old. Surely, sir, a blot or two of a warm afternoon is not to be severely urged against grey hairs. Old age—even if it blot the page—is honorable. With submission, sir, we *both* are getting old." (16)

In this interplay, the blot represents Turkey's decline and deterioration as a copyist, yet it also represents the tired and the timeworn—a graying of hairs and a succumbing to the everyday doldrums. Turkey posits a mutual "gentleman's" desire for a reprieve from the confines of the city even as his position as an office clerk marks his position as liminal between gentleman and laborer. Turkey attempts to awaken the lawyer's pastoral fantasy of an idyllic nature before the

narrator's damning judgment of his increasingly erratic afternoon penmanship. The narrator sees the blots as a literal mark or demerit against Turkey, yet Turkey uses this apparent deficiency to point to their shared old age.

For Turkey, the indelible blot represents a longing for an escape from the young man's game of Wall Street and a yearning for a life lived as an old bachelor freed from the copying desk. This image of the old bachelor in nature is pictured in *Moby-Dick* in the description of a portly old bachelor whale that Stubb summarily slaughters in "Stubb Kills a Whale" as "smoking his pipe as upon a warm summer day" (308). Turkey evokes this fantasy of a gentleman's placid warm afternoons such as Rip Van Winkle's yearning for the "quiet little Dutch inn of yore" to gain the sympathy of the narrator (Irving 988). Yet though this actuality of the reposed gentleman bachelor is as remote from Turkey as the real bachelor whale in the Atlantic, the blots are here to stay as a sign of his coming descent into the lower depths of the city.

The lawyer declines to sympathize with Turkey's condition or put himself in Turkey's figural overcoat, not because he lacks the capacity for sympathy but because his professional standing in the city is first and foremost. The lawyer upholds class privilege and expects, if not a continual "civility and deference" from the flighty Turkey, an acknowledgement of the divide between his Master Chancery appointment and Turkey's standing as a hired hand (Melville 17). Turkey's tenuous existence is embodied by his "lustrous face" and seedy coat (17). On his small income, Turkey becomes equal parts reliant on the lawyer and dependent on alcohol. In a later reference to the blots, the lawyer sees Turkey under the increased pressure of his copying: "It was afternoon, be it remembered. Turkey sat glowing like a brass boiler, his bald head steaming, his hands reeling among his blotted papers" (24). The narrator imagines Turkey's diminished mental facilities put under tremendous strain to achieve some prescribed mechanical task. Turkey's output is a predicable curve of Boyle's Law under the workday grind.

Unlike Turkey who attempts to sidle up to the "gentleman" lawyer's class, Nippers seeks out the subversive energies of the city. Denied access to the law, Nippers makes use of the growing swell of political power from this mass of new immigrants to New York. To the Whigs, Nippers's political activities as a "ward-politician" who acts with the Democratic Party in registering immigrant districts and neighborhoods is toppling the political power structure and giving in to a mob rule (16). Wyn Kelley writes, "The lawyer calls this 'diseased ambition' as, like Astor, he believes in limiting the ambitions of those who work for him. But Nippers presumably wants his share of the political process and its gifts and he devotes considerable energy to his ambition" (206). The lawyer reads Nippers's "nervous testiness and grinning irritability" as "causing the teeth to audibly grind together over mistakes committed in copying; unnecessary maledictions, hissed, rather than spoken, in the heat of business; and especially by a continual disconnect with the heights of the table where he worked" (16). The significance of the words *grind*, *business*, *height*, and *worked* all reinforce the top-down structure of the society and the weight of this hierarchy upon Nippers. He can hardly hope to attain a middle-class life working through the "principled" *quid pro quo* business arrangements and professional affiliations. Nippers cannot move up this hierarchy on his four cents a folio pay, so he seeks out the "wondrous social sympathy" of the lower class to redress the barriers imposed by the Whig hierarchy ("Mystery of Iniquity" 443).

Nippers represents a threat to the established order of things. His resentment of the lawyer's social, political, and professional ties that secured his appointment and its "life-lease of profits" is barely suppressed in his daily work (14). The lawyer's assessment of Nippers as the "victim of two evil powers—ambition and indigestion" reveals the lawyer's entrenchment within the brick and mortar construct of the Whig ideology (16). Nippers's attempt to rise above the indignity of a mere copyist leads him, in the lawyer's eyes, to "an unwarrantable usurpation of

strictly professional affairs" (16). As a Tombs lawyer, Nippers enters into the extralegal transactions at the steps of "Justice's courts," tapping into how the *American Whig Review* author of the "Mystery of Iniquity" appraised the underground economy as "widely-variant grades of villainy" of the American metropolis (446).

As an apprentice to the lawyer, not simply an "errand boy," Ginger Nut represents the American Dream in a post-Jacksonian America. Ginger Nut's carman father places his son in the law office "ambitious of seeing his son on the bench instead of a cart, before he died" (18). The lawyer's office may seem in appearance as befitting an aspiring working-class son's introduction to the law, but by the lawyer's own admission, he acts as a "conveyancer and title hunter, and drawer-up of recondite documents of all sorts" (19). Needless to say, this is not the stuff of boyhood imagination. By engaging in a trade of Spitzenbergs, cakes and apples, and ginger nuts and possibly other under the table offerings, Ginger Nut is more a niche entrepreneur who lubricates his pockets by offering a respite from the dryness of the copyists' parchment. When the lawyer looks upon Ginger Nut's neglected desk, the lawyer writes, "The drawer exhibited a great array of the shells of various sorts of nuts. Indeed, to the quick-witted youth, the whole noble science of law was contained in a nutshell" (18). The lawyer in fact has signed on Ginger Nut as an apprentice, but he is receiving an education in how to skim off a few pennies from a cake and apple sale. The lawyer recognizes his intelligence and latent entrepreneurial energies, but Ginger Nut has as much chance of becoming a lawyer as Bartleby filling the Hope-Chapel on Broadway with his course of lectures on "Dead Wall Revelries."

The gap between the lawyer's position and that of his employee within the structural hierarchy is represented in the lawyer's description of the void between his second story view and the tall edifices before him: "Owing to the great height of the surrounding buildings, and my chambers being on the second floor, the interval between this wall and mine not a little resembled a huge cistern" (14). The lawyer assumes what Dana Nelson in *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (1998) calls a captaincy of men that leads both to an elevated sense of his achievement as a professional but also to a sense of isolation from the camaraderie of men of lower classes (7). The competition between peers underlies the professional class of legal gentlemen. And the lawyer as an appointed Master Chancery would be keenly aware of these lingering resentments and acute animosities that threaten his position. The lawyer may feel himself abused by the vagaries of the business world with the "sudden and violent abrogation of the office of the Master Chancery" (7).

Melville's criticism of this structural and cultural divide between the professional class and the copyists reflects greater social upheaval in America. Melville writes and publishes "Bartleby" at a time when the trades and apprentice system of New York were in great decline. In *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*, a groundbreaking study of labor in New York City, Sean Wilentz states, "By 1850, with the erosion of the artisan system, that shared vision had virtually collapsed and been replaced by new and opposing conceptions of republican politics and the social relations that would best sustain them" (15). Where Benjamin Franklin idealized the individual as self-made through his own economic agency, seeking greater mastery and visibility through the trades, the copyist, like other laborers outside the vital middle class, formed cohesive forms of mutual sympathy in the boxing arena, saloons, and oyster houses of New York. The tumultuous atmosphere of Gotham undergoing structural and social transformation obscures Bartleby as a fixed point of refusal in his dead wall revelries and characterizes him as a haunting presence on Wall Street, threatening its very core business-is-business principle.

The lawyer hires Bartleby as a buttress against the functional dysfunction of his contrapuntal copyists. As a provisional friend outside these bonds of social cohesion, Bartleby,

gentlemanly in appearance, fills a void in the lawyer's peer relationships and provides a salve to the office resentments. Bartleby presents an unaffected taciturnity—seemingly impervious to the ambitions, rivalries, divisions, and antagonisms of the city and inured to the frustrations, threats, and dependencies of his fellow copyists. He is described as "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn" and "a man of so singularly sedate an aspect, which I thought might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey, and the fiery one of Nippers" (19). The lawyer describes Bartleby as the perfect copyist except for his lacking the requisite Franklinian buoyancy: "He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically" (20). Bartleby's steady work suggests two different meanings in antebellum America: as a mechanic or as a tradesman who works at his craft in an industrious manner and as a mechanism of work or a mechanical being who copies tirelessly without complaint as a human Xerox machine.

Melville undermines the former meaning as a "mechanic" in his satire of Franklin's arrival in London with Bartleby's entrance in the law office. With the expectation of Governor Keith's letter of credit arriving to aid Franklin in setting up his printing house in Philadelphia by purchasing the press, type, and paper and providing letters of introduction to make his way into London society, Franklin's ambiguous social standing is reflected in Bartleby's own enigmatic standing in the office. On the passage from Philadelphia to London, Franklin initially takes a berth in steerage where he is not known and can be perceived as "ordinary." He is later able to share a cabin with a higher class of merchants, lawyers, and businessmen who take notice of him and elevate him into their company. This social rise speaks in a nutshell of Franklin's self-interest and his view of friendship as a valuable and useful means of advancement. On arriving in London, Franklin discovers no line of credit and no such letters. His friend Denham advises him "to endeavor getting some Employment in the Way of my Business. Among the Printers here, says he, you will improve yourself: and when you return to America, you will set up to greater Advantage" (564).

The account of the Watts Printing House provides one of the great workplace narratives in American literature. Melville will draw from this scene in *Israel Potter* (1855) when Franklin serves Israel water instead of white wine, stating "'Plain water is a very good drink for plain men'" and then exhausts Israel with his equation of a bottle of wine to seventy-eight penny rolls when in fact an exasperated Israel just wants one glass of wine not six penny loaves from his wealthy benefactor (44). In Franklin's rise from the shop floor, he moves from pressman to compositor to be given the more lucrative high priority work due to his "uncommon quickness" at the compositor's table (565). The account of his beneficial effect on the Watts Printing House has a special resonance with Bartleby's passivity within the Wall Street office. Melville makes this connection between Franklin and Bartleby through the appearance of the strong ale to undermine the viability of Franklin's model rise in the American metropolis. Bartleby's entrance as a copyist into the Chancery, along with the lawyer's initial belief in Bartleby's benefit to the office by his example of industry, parallels and confounds Franklin's description of his own work as a pressman in the Watts Printing House. Melville satirizes Franklin's rise within the printing house through Bartleby's confounding passivity and defiant inaction. On seeing Bartleby's consistent work, the lawyer's first impression of his melancholy contrasts with what the lawyer would identify as Franklin's "cheerful industry." Franklin describes his work as a pressman:

> I drank only Water; the other workmen, near 50 in Number, were great Guzzlers of Beer. On occasion I carried up and down Stairs a large Form of Types in each hand, when others carried but one in both Hands. They wonder'd to see from this and several

> instances that the Water-American as they called me was *stronger* than themselves, who drunk *strong* Beer. (567)

Franklin resists this ontology of ale that equates the strength of the pressman to the strong beer he guzzles. However, the other workers in the printing house had a regular system established to enhance their "energy" throughout the day:

> We had an Alehouse Boy who attended always in the House to supply the Workmen. My Companion at the Press drank every day a Pint before Breakfast, a Pint at Breakfast with his Bread and Cheese; a Pint between Breakfast and Dinner; a Pint at Dinner, a Pint in the Afternoon about Six o'clock, and another when he had done his Day's Work. I thought it a detestable Custom. But it was necessary, he suppos'd, to drink *strong* Beer that he might be *strong* to labor. (567)

Unlike the other workers, Franklin as the man of the Enlightenment puts his rational mind on notice, differentiating the enthralling effects of the ale from its constitutive elements, and through his mastery of the printer's trade demonstrates his strength and efficiency without the requisite six pints of *strong* beer. Yet even as he resists this custom, he is marked as the Water-American and subject to devious pranks at his compositor table until he can gain influence. Thus, through Franklin's steadfastness and willingness to accept mischief and pay his beer tax in the short run, he ultimately wins out in the long run. He sways the compositors to his economical habit of buying for the price of a pint of beer "a large Porringer of hot Water-gruel, sprinkled with Pepper, crumbl'd with Bread, and a bit of Butter in it…" (567).

Similarly, Bartleby stands apart from the other copyists and likewise does not see the benefit of contributing to the customs of the office. When asked by the lawyer to assemble as copyists to proof the quadruplicates of a "week's testimony taken before me in my Master Chancery," Bartleby responds, "I would prefer not to." And through the entrenched practice of the dinner beer Melville satirizes Franklin's enlightening effect upon the Watts printing chapel. The beer at dinner signals the changing of the guard in the office between the better and worse natures of the copyists:

> "Sit down, Turkey," said I, "and hear what Nippers has to say. What do you think of it, Nippers? Would I not be justified in immediately dismissing Bartleby?"
> "Excuse me, that is for you to decide, sir. I think his conduct quite unusual, and indeed unjust, as regards Turkey and myself. But it may only be a passing whim."
> "Ah," exclaimed I, "you have strangely changed your mind then—you speak very gently of him now."
> "All beer," cried Turkey; "gentleness is effects of beer—Nippers and I dined together to-day. You see how gentle *I* am, sir. Shall I go and black his eyes?"
> "You refer to Bartleby, I suppose. No, not to-day, Turkey," I replied; "pray, put up your fists."
> I closed the doors, and again advanced towards Bartleby. I felt additional incentives tempting me to my fate. I burned to be rebelled against again. I remembered that Bartleby never left the office. (24-5)

The beer represents the crux of the natural arrangement of the lawyer's office. After his dinner beer, Nippers takes an impartial and disinterested view of Bartleby's refusal. In contrast, Turkey, who most likely began the day with his breakfast beer or something stronger, is enflamed by Bartleby's unwillingness to abide by his obligations to the office. The beer is not an ingredient of character but the spirit itself. In the daily grind of copying, the labor appears to wear away the

natural elasticity of the mind and the fitness of the body. Nippers achieves serenity only after his dinner beer, and when Turkey has exceeded his beer allotment, he goes off the rails.

Beer further emerges as the cloudy class consciousness of the downtown and downtrodden of New York. Turkey claims beer as a means of acquiescence to office authority and urges Bartleby to drink to dispel the passivity he sees as act of rebellion:

> "With submission, sir," said he, "yesterday I was thinking about Bartleby here, and I think that if he would but prefer to take a quart of good ale every day, it would do much towards mending him, and enabling him to assist in examining his papers."
> "So you have got the word too," said I, slightly excited.
> "With submission, what word, sir," asked Turkey, respectfully crowding himself into the contracted space behind the screen, and by so doing, making me jostle the scrivener. "What word, sir?"
> "I would prefer to be left alone here," said Bartleby, as if offended at being mobbed in his privacy. (22)

In resurfacing the antediluvian link of quality (strong ale) and effect (physical strength) that Franklin worked so diligently to sever through his own bodily demonstration of his vitality and his rational argument for a far more substantial and less murky alternative to breakfast ale (hot gruel and breadcrumbs), Melville reveals a failure of Franklin's aspirational model of advancement in antebellum New York. Bartleby and the scriveners are fixed as functionaries in this Whig city, yet Bartleby's semblance of propriety and decorum provides an unexpected fracture to the brick-and-mortar edifice of the Master Chancery office. Bartleby's resistance to the flow of legal documents is at once unrecognizable to the lawyer as revolt, as a pernicious impediment to the order of things. The affecting power of "prefer" resides in its placidness—not the noisome dissonance and vulgar passions of the Democratic Party that the Whigs counter with their promise of a more prosperous society that will benefit all Greater New York City.

Bartleby and Flight into Egyptian Gloom

The lawyer's use of "crowding," "mobbed," and "privacy" to describe Bartleby's perceived affront by Turkey's cure-all reveals sympathy with Bartleby's aloofness from the city's energies. Bartleby's nebulous definition highlights two separate classes of New York citizenry: those who can leave the city and those who are trapped in the city. Bartleby mirrors the description of pallid workers trapped in the substructure of the metropolis. A June 17, 1852, *New York Times* article entitled "The Fields and the Streets" clarifies this division of city life:

> But the great masses, the substructure of our population, the working classes, do not stir. The centrifugal force of the dollar they cannot employ. Theirs are the reeking courts, allies and narrow streets, which the paternal negligence of the authorities provides for them. It is for them to remain in the heated workshops, inhaling pestilent gasses; or be seated all day in the curved postures of the work-bench, or table, longing for the week's end. You may see them, at twilight pacing languidly homeward, the native hue of health sicklied over with the pallor of a confined and sedentary life. (2)

Melville's description of Bartleby as "thin and pale" mirrors "the pallor of a confined and sedentary life" like that of the life of the city worker referred to in this article. Melville sets the story of Wall Street in the Master Chancery office that circulates and notifies the mortgages and legal documents that drive up the property values, finance the newly erected five story brick tenements of the Five Points, and push the expansion of the city uptown, thereby further isolating

the laborers downtown. However, Bartleby is not of this great mass of the working-class culture. His difference and diffidence are readily seen in remarks by his boss, the lawyer: "I was quite sure he never visited any…eating house…he never drank beer like Turkey, or tea and coffee even, like other men; that he never went anywhere in particular…that he had declined telling who he was, or whence he came, or whether he had any relatives…that though so thin and pale, he never complained of ill health" (Melville 28). In short, the scrivener becomes a fixture of the office. While Turkey plays up his British class deference, and Nippers can hardly contain his resentment for the lawyer's appointed position as Master Chancery, Bartleby accepts his position in the material hierarchy. Although Bartleby's passive resistance emphasizes his paltry pay and his meager existence within the substructure of the Whig hierarchy, Bartleby's residence in the office and his bandanna savings bank suggest a form of reconciliation with the oppositional nature of city life. In the Wall Street office and before the brick wall, Bartleby builds his own "fortress of solitude" (Thomson 93) within this larger superstructure of business and finance.

The lawyer takes Bartleby's fixity for a soul. Like Turkey who equates vitality with strong ale, the lawyer interprets Bartleby's passivity behind his screen for a kind of sublimity within the greater push and pull of the otherwise undisciplined metropolitan energies: "The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy!" (28). Bartleby's proximity as a fixture of melancholy, an unalterable and unadulterated form of this feeling, stands apart from urbanity's sustaining forms of mass identity and low entertainments. The lawyer's evocation of "gloom" and his attestation of fraternal sympathy with the mystery at the heart of Bartleby overturn the order of things and call into question his class affiliations and professional reputation even at the financial center of the metropolis. In describing his walk down the fashionable West side of Broadway to his Wall Street office, the lawyer is drawn to the downtown for some semblance of a true state of feeling:

> For both I and Bartleby 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 courts the light, so we deem the world is gay; but misery hides aloof, so we deem that misery there is none. (28)

In this walk down Broadway, the lawyer carries a symbolic flag of his "fraternal melancholy" (Melville 28) with Bartleby through the parade of dandies and pretty girls. He eschews fashion and pretense for the forlornness of Bartleby's hermitage in his Wall Street office.

Melville references the lawyer's movement from uptown to downtown six times: "Now, one Sunday morning I happened to go to Trinity Church," "sailing down the Mississippi of Broadway," "As I walked home," "After breakfast, I walked down town," "'will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my dwelling,'" "ran up Wall-street towards Broadway" (26, 27, 33, 34, 41, and 42). In the last two instances, the feelings of downtown reverse in order and magnitude. The uptown privacy and solitude of his dwelling place and the downtown as a place of business and professional reputation become entangled. An 1853 *New York Times* article "Our Streets—A Before-Breakfast Talk with Strangers?" describes the division of uptown and downtown: "Moreover, as almost everybody's office is on the Battery end of the City, and as almost everybody's residence is as far toward the north as he can consistently get, 'to go down town' is equivalent with the masses going to work, while 'to go uptown' is to return to tea, to stroll on the avenues looking at the pretty girls or to seek the bosom of one's family" (4).

Broadway delineates the private and public poles of the Whig lawyer. In his walk downtown, the lawyer would rise in prominence and conform to the principle of business, yet this

line of disassociation of the private from the public has been compromised by the lawyer's sympathy for Bartleby:

> After breakfast, I walked down town, arguing the probabilities *pro* and *con*. One moment I thought it would prove a miserable failure, and Bartleby would be found all alive at my office as usual; the next moment it seemed certain that I should see his chair empty. And so I kept veering about. (34)

The lawyer's description of his thoughts "veering about" emphasizes his internal struggle against the downtown pressures to sever his connection to Bartleby. Careening down Broadway would jeopardize his body in the fury of cart traffic or cast him as debauched or worse, a lunatic, amongst the fashionable gentlemen and ladies. Yet the lawyer's walk appears in line with the citizens going to their offices in the Battery End; in this "fraternal melancholy" with Bartleby (28), the lawyer's thoughts are counterproductive and out of step with the business principle of Wall Street.

The uptown and downtown dichotomy of Broadway exposes the lawyer's internal division. The lawyer first references his conscience in terms of his "professionalism" that, unlike his "charity" in giving his old coat to Nippers, is seemingly not a transaction of sorts but an act of sympathy that has no set value or expected returns on his investment: "To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange willfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience" (23). Bartleby is a palliative for the toil of the lawyer's physical and emotional isolation in his office. His act to "befriend" Bartleby initially does not interfere with his professional reputation but quite the opposite; it buttresses his sense of his unalloyed generosity and enlivens his sense of purpose and belonging in the albeit insular world of the Master Chancery. Bartleby is a pleasant subject for his office ruminations and offers a tangible reward for his emotional bond. Later, though, when Bartleby becomes obstinate and threatens to undermine his captaincy of the office in the eyes of his peers, the lawyer asks, "What shall I do? what ought I to do? what does conscience say I *should* do with this man, or rather ghost" (38). Bartleby's transformation from a material object, "a sweet morsel," to a haunting presence, an immaterial "ghost," suggests the lawyer's inability to act by his conscience in the Whig city. The passivity of Bartleby lays bare the lawyer's structure of thought. In cutting his entanglements to the unaccountable copyist and writing off his bonds of affection, the lawyer upholds his functionary role of the Master Chancery to the established social hierarchy.

Under the mounting trials and tribulations of Bartleby, the narrator moves offices, but in one last act of contrition, he returns to his old office to exhort Bartleby, "will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my dwelling—and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure? Come, let us start now, right away" (41). This first reference to the lawyer's uptown dwelling—a home as seemingly far removed from the demands of No.____ Wall Street as Rip Van Winkle's hunting grounds in the Catskill Mountains—marks a pivotal moment in the narrator's self-recognition of the internal division between his public and private selves. As the lawyer's intensity over Bartleby grows, so does his agitation: "So fearful was I of being again hunted out by the incensed landlord and his exasperated tenants" (42). But of course, Bartleby refuses to move from the office and stays true to his fixity: "No: at present I would prefer not to make any change at all" (41). In collapsing the uptown "dwelling" (possibly Irving Place at 23rd and Lexington Ave) and his downtown "office," Broadway emerges as the internal structure by which the lawyer can occupy these two divided public and private selves.

Breaking down under the weight of the Master Chancery position and all its attendant responsibilities and mounting pressures, the lawyer flees the city, running "up Wall-street towards Broadway, and jumping into the first omnibus" to escape to the rustic environs of

Manhattan as a refuge from his legal and emotional bonds to Bartleby (42). Although the distressed lawyer attempted to be "entirely care-free and quiescent," he found that the bus did not take him far enough: "…surrendering my business to Nippers, for a few days I drove about the upper part of the town and through the suburbs, in my rockaway; crossed over to Jersey City and Hoboken, and paid fugitive visits to Manhattanville and Astoria. In fact, I almost lived in my rockaway for the time" (42). The lawyer's escape from Wall Street signals a shift in the mood and tenor of the story.

As the lawyer's conscience is torn apart by the competing demands of Wall Street, and the downtown threatens to entrap the lawyer in a legal suit, it becomes a labyrinthine metropolis of dark criminality and ensnaring forces. The lawyer's diction with the words "fearful," "incensed," "hunted out," "surrendering," "fugitive" suggests a dramatic shift in the narrator's orientation to the city. The uptown lawyer is now like a transient worker who travels for several days without a residence to stop at or who might sleep in whatever makeshift bed is available. As a result of the housing shortages in the city, thousands resided in shantytowns in upper Manhattan outside the municipal fire limits, and in the city itself, the poor slept in the streets. (Burrows and Wallace 749). As the lawyer, though temporarily, switches places in the hierarchy, the lawyer's story moves into a different genre from a quizzical character study of a peculiar copyist to a mystery-and-misery novel wherein the lawyer finds himself as the innocent victim of an evil and oppressive force. Wyn Kelley speaks of these mystery-and-misery novels as popular with the antebellum working class and middle class "in portraying the poverty and humiliation of the city's most wretched inhabitants" (110). Within these works of fiction, the labyrinth became a central image "not just of decay in certain sections of town, but of the systematic corruption of the whole city."

In leaving behind the lawyer's "lateral view of certain grimy back-yards and bricks" of his Master Chancery office window and journeying out to the circumference of Greater New York City, the lawyer renews his sense of belonging to the city center. Contemporary accounts of the trip across Manhattan describe Broadway as a playground for the sporting class. The 1853 article "Our Streets—A Before-Breakfast Talk with Strangers?" personifies Broadway as a robust gentleman imparting renewed vitality and tranquility to its fellow traveler: "Starting from the Bowling-Green as if that were the bulb from which it grew, and as if it were watered by its fountain, Broadway marches in a straight line northeastward" (4). Bowling Green serves as Broadway's mythical head and source as if its life sprung from the fountains at the Battery end fully formed as the native New Yorker. Broadway's drive to maintain its "central character and reputation" in providing its traveler picturesque vistas and lively recreation with its guide-boards, stops at pleasant locales, and scenic vistas, upholds the unspoken fellowship of gentlemanly culture (4). The power of Broadway's tour reaffirms the mutual beneficence of the fraternal companion who not only in name but indeed is what they appear to be.

Broadway's route from downtown to uptown to the suburbs to the Bloomingdale Road to Kings Bridge Road and across the Spuyten Duyvil Creek on the King's Bridge to the country mirrors the lawyer's own "fugitive visits to Manhattanville and Astoria." Manhattanville was the site of Tucker's hostel called the "Half-way House." John S. Sauzade describes this setting in his novel *The Spuytenduvel Chronicle* (1856) as "Trees environ the house, and, at the rear, the green sward slopes to the broad Hudson. Before you, the noble river glides majestically to the ocean's mouth, and the bosky dells and glades of classic Weehawk stretch to the basaltic cliffs above" (165). The "Half-Way House," so named for being halfway up Manhattan and half a day's ride from downtown, provided majestic natural areas for gentlemen to escape from the brick and mortar blocks of the city and suburban customs of parlor rooms and tea tables. The lawyer's own rehabilitation on his rockaway trip would take him through these same enlivening views and

sportsman refuges to alleviate the pressures and hassles of Wall Street. In traveling up Broadway, the lawyer's selfhood becomes redrawn to reflect the orientation of the private to uptown and the public to downtown. This restored topography of selfhood embodies the true nature and bearing of a gentleman New Yorker.

The lawyer's rockaway provides him a means to rise above his Bartleby entanglements and escape the wretchedness of the metropolis. In effect, the lawyer's journey up Broadway and into the picturesque resets his story. In passing under what would become the site for Latting Observatory as he departs for Manhattanville, the lawyer feels the loosened reach and diminished pull of his downtown disquietude. His journey to Jersey City, Hoboken, and Astoria circumscribes the metropolitan space of Greater New York City that Cornelius Mathews describes in *A Pen and Ink Panorama of New-York City* (1853) of New York from on high the Latting Observatory and realizes Benjamin Franklin Smith's popular hand-colored 1855 lithograph. The Latting Observatory was built in 1853 and burnt to the ground in 1856. For a small fee, the citizens of New York could climb the tower and view the city in all directions from a platform 300 feet above the city. This tower was the tallest structure in New York, exceeding the height of the downtown St. Paul's Cathedral Church steeple. Mathews and Smith's panoramic views of Greater New York City popularized the Observatory as a central landmark of the greater metropolitan space. In cataloging the sights of the island city, the surrounding towns and rustic villages, and ports and market farms, Cornelius Mathews, a fellow reporter and friend of Whitman, captures the paramount idea of the American metropolis—its "everlasting energy" (206).

The verticality that Melville imposes through the relationship of the lawyer to Bartleby and the uptown-downtown path along Broadway intensifies the moments when the lawyer attempts to create friendship with Bartleby, because those fleeting moments reveal the utter absence of the horizontal, the lack of camaraderie. The void that the lawyer eventually recognizes, and which causes him to flee to Manhattanville in an almost frenzied state, is his suddenly conscious recognition of his inability to relate to another human being. This inability has everything to do with the fact that he is a "business" man first. Thus, when the lawyer returns downtown, he renounces his dispiriting friendship with Bartleby for his renewed fellowship with Broadway. The description of Bartleby being led away by the constables and joined by young men arm in arm provides further evidence of the narrator's disconnection from the degradations of city life outside his uptown-downtown map of selfhood: "the silent procession filed its way through all the noise, and heat, and joy of the roaring thoroughfares at noon" (42). The lawyer views Bartleby as a potential spark of mob violence—a rallying point for the masses who see in Bartleby's plight their own dislocation from the discriminatory and hierarchical structure. At any moment, the streets might explode in open hostility and riot against the status quo.

When his former landlord directs the lawyer to give a statement of the facts of Bartleby's history, the lawyer follows through with this plan of action: "These tidings had a conflicting effect upon me. At first I was indignant; but at last almost approved. 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" (42). Melville's strongest criticism of the gentlemanly culture happens at this juncture. The "conflicting effect" in following the plan set for him aligns the lawyer with the Whigs. The lawyer initially resists the final solution of the Bartleby problem, but he relinquishes his moral responsibility. Upholding the duty of his Mastery Chancery office, his conscience conforms to the business-is-business principle undergirding Wall Street.

With the lawyer's statement of Bartleby's aberrant behavior recorded, copied, and filed in the Halls of Justice, Bartleby takes his place as a vagrant within the criminal class in the sub-substructure of antebellum New York. In his visit to the Tombs, the lawyer describes Bartleby as

isolated from the metropolis: the "surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sound behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot" (44). The weight of the prison architecture—its Egyptian gloom—and the paucity of "soft imprisoned turf" stand in stark contrast to the natural vitality and restorative splendor of the lawyer's fugitive visits to Manhattanville and Astoria. Yet the Tombs and the Wall Street office are of the same stuff. Both the lawyer and Bartleby discern the hierarchy. The Tombs even imposes its own internal order wherein the more violent criminals, murderers, and thieves are kept in the lower tier of dank, crowded cells, and inmates like Bartleby who pose no threat are put in the higher tier of cells and allowed to walk the grounds. Bartleby's immoveable and irredeemable position before the dead wall of the prison reinforces the perpetuity of the Whig city.

The Egyptian gloom of the prison architecture that Bartleby experiences raises the specter of historical Egypt. In antebellum New York the Tombs and the Croton Water Works were the two most visible examples of Egyptian architecture (Silver 88). The Croton Water Works were an homage to the riches of Egypt and its fertile Nile valley. Significantly, the Croton water works would allow the city to grow northwards up Fifth Avenue. But at this moment the lawyer feels the oppressive weight of the Tombs's monolithic power in the "Egyptian character of the masonry." The Tombs conveys the absolute power of the pharaohs to punish any subversive or criminal act that threatens its dynasty. Bartleby, deemed a vagrant, is cast off from the Whig city and hidden from view in the Tombs.

The lawyer comes to see the city in a new light as a stark and brutal Pharoah-like top-down power structure dissevered from this Whiggish historical construct of mutual beneficence. The appearance of the word *gentleman* in the lawyer's conversation with the grub-man Cutlets exposes the unseen structure of this Whig city. Significantly, Melville uses *gentleman* twelve times in the story of Bartleby. Yet only in the Tombs does *gentleman* refer to a specific individual. In other references it designates a "gentlemanly" quality of a person or to a class of citizen, as a "good-natured gentlemen," "legal gentleman," or as the landlord describes his tenants as "gentlemen" (Melville 13, 37, and 40). *Gentleman* differentiates a class of citizens from the mechanics and laboring class. It connotes the hierarchy, yet *gentleman* without the supporting substructure has no meaning. In the first exchange with the grub-man, *gentleman* reaffirms the position of the lawyer: "I am the grub-man. Such gentlemen as have friends here, hire me to provide them with something good to eat" (43). The grub-man Cutlets emphasizes the divide between a class of men of certain refinements, professional and educational distinctions, and markers of wealth and the common criminal. The grub-man's own direct link between his name and the service he provides reinforce his utility to the gentleman class to provide for friends undoubtedly unaccustomed to the meager prison fare.

In the Tombs, the grub-man, the lowest man in the hierarchy of the Whig city, destabilizes the social position of the gentleman: "Well now, upon my word, I thought that friend of yourn was a gentleman forger; they are always pale and genteel-like, them forgers" (44). The grub-man's appraisal of Bartleby as a gentleman, a friend of the lawyer, and a forger provides a sort of curious Venn diagram of these three intersecting domains. The grub-man's pronouncement of Bartleby as "that friend of yourn" tests this truth table and makes apparent the bond between the lawyer and Bartleby. Bartleby impresses the lawyer with his gentlemanly demeanor on his first meeting, and his aloofness from the animus of Nippers and the degradation of Turkey engenders the lawyer's sympathy for Bartleby. The grub-man identifies the distinct gentlemanly qualities of Bartleby in his paleness and quietude. The pallid scrivener is easily distinguishable from the common working-class criminals. And Bartleby sets himself apart in the yard, like a gentleman from the common criminal.

If we look at the second domain of the grub-man's supposition that Bartleby is a friend, forger, and gentleman, the foundation of the social order breaks down. Bartleby is a hired hand—a mechanic whose only skill is his swift penmanship. The demarcation between forger and copyist is one of legality not of kind. Like a forger, a copyist makes a genuine copy of the original document to serve as its facsimile. A forger likewise, but illegally, makes a counterfeit of a banknote or signature of a binding document to circulate as authentic. However, the banking world and the financial sector benefitted from the counterfeiters in the antebellum economy. In *A Nation of Counterfeiters*, Stephen Mihm writes of a nation reliant on this bogus currency to up the flow of money and loosen fiscal restrictions:

This was a country whose inhabitants desperately needed and wanted money to make their dreams a reality, and where banks fell short, counterfeiters proved more than willing to pick up the slack. Many people in the business of banking viewed counterfeiting as a small price to pay for a system of money creation governed not by the edicts of a central bank or the fiscal arm of the state, but by insatiable private demand for credit in the form of bank notes. (15)

Thus, Bartleby's crimpy hand in quadruplicate for the court and the counterfeiter's skill in forging bank notes for their dispersal in the marketplace all contribute to the growth of Wall Street and cement the island city as the nation's financial hub. The banking class benefits from this parallel system of money creation that subverts the gold standard and provides credit to spur the growth of Greater New York City. Yet when Bartleby's friendship costs the lawyer his professional reputation in his peers' talk of the lawyer's loss of command over his copyists, Bartleby is let go. Thus, the forger/copyist circle of this Venn diagram effectively nullifies this truth table. Bartley cannot be a friend; if he is a copyist/forger, he is not a gentleman. The lawyer is a friend in name only—a counterfeit or facsimile of Aristotle's notion of friendship.

Through Bartleby, Melville exposes—a little lower layer—the nature of the gentleman removed from the structural hierarchy. In the Tombs, Bartleby eschews all trappings and affiliations of the gentleman culture and its mutual beneficence society. The grub-man's offer to Bartleby to dine in a private room befitting a gentleman shows the obverse face of the Whig city, "'Hope you find it pleasant here, sir;—spacious grounds—cool apartments, sir—hope you'll stay with us some time—try to make it agreeable. May Mrs. Cutlets and I have the pleasure of your company to dinner, sir, in Mrs. Cutlets' private room?'" (44). Bartleby's response, "'It would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners'" as he takes up "a position fronting the dead-wall" is a renouncement of the comfort of gentleman society (44). Dinner, the great repast of the gentleman, is unsuited to Bartleby. Bartleby is neither gentleman nor non-gentleman, and in the Tombs he is immune to the lawyer's sympathy and adverse to his concerns. And in kind, Bartleby starves himself to death, exposing once and for all that there is no such thing as a gentleman in the business-first directives of the Whig city.

The lawyer's travels up Broadway into the rustic environs clash with the sight of Bartleby's deathly pallor in the "grass-platted yard" (43). The "soft imprisoned turf" is not Whitman's leaves of grass, a unifying ideation of the seamless integration of all the energies of the metropolis and the nation. The lawyer is a mere material, brick and mortar, in Melville's nomenclature of masonry and dead walls. As Master Chancery, the lawyer will be discarded from this supporting structure and be all but dust before the supporting structure of the American metropolis. His only staying power in New York City is the hidden wisdom embedded in the story of the quizzical Bartleby. And, if Bartleby—his unaccountability within and willful differentiation from the order of things—is what he purports to be, a kernel of truth that threatens to grind to a halt the business-is-business ethos, he will rise out of the Egyptian gloom and occupy Wall Street in times to come.

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