

“Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853)

Herman Melville

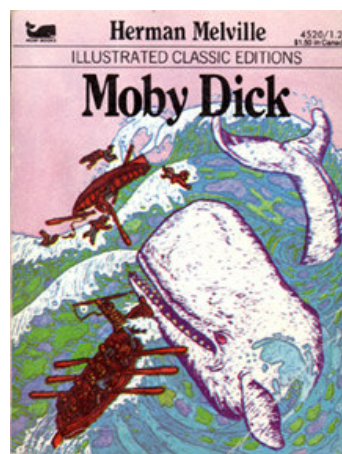
Herman Melville (1819-1891)

- 19th c. American writer most famous for *Moby-Dick* (1851), about Captain Ahab and the white whale
- Born into wealthy New York family, but father died in debt
- At 21, Melville went to South Seas on a whaling boat
- Wrote popular seafaring adventure novels *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847); followed later by *Redburn* (1849) and *White-Jacket* (1850)



Herman Melville (1819-1891)

- But Melville launched on a more literary, philosophical direction with *Mardi* (1849); followed by his masterpiece *Moby-Dick* (1851), and *Pierre* (1853); critics not happy
- Newspaper account: "HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY"



Herman Melville (1819-1891)

- Married in 1847, now with children, Melville needs income; in 1853 and following, publishes short stories in monthly magazines, including “Bartleby” (1853)
- 1860s and 70s: poetry, including *Battle-Pieces* (1866) about Civil War; reputation in decline; Melville suffers financially and personally (son commits suicide in 1867)
- 1880s: with inheritances, Melville is able to focus on writing. Last great work: *Billy Budd, Sailor*.
- Today, Melville regarded as great world writer

Doubles

- In “Bartleby,” the narrator’s identity becomes intertwined with the strange, intractable scrivener Bartleby
- The humor, and the tragedy, of this story lie in the narrator’s inability to either understand Bartleby or to separate from him

Narrator

- 2330-31: Lawyer: “the easiest way of life is the best”: does “a snug business among rich men’s bonds and mortgages”
- According to John Jacob Astor, his strong points are prudence and method

The Hatches (the kind of wealthy family the narrator works for)



Bartleby

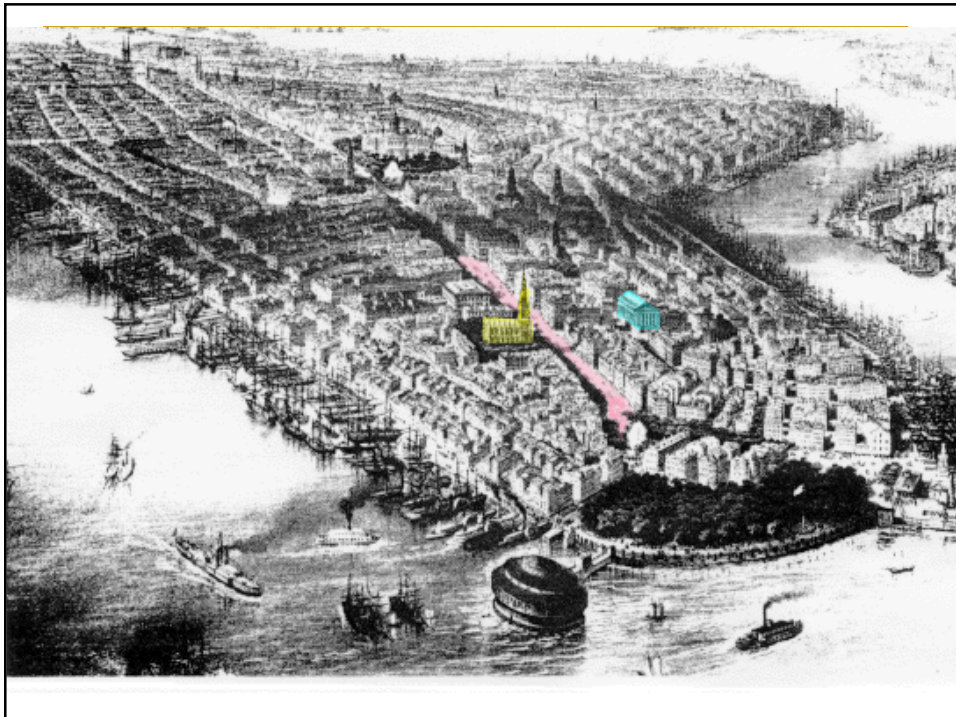
- A new copyist, “pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn”; he writes “silently, palely, mechanically (2335)
- “mild, firm voice” replies: “I would prefer not to.” “Not a ripple of agitation” (2236)
- Bartleby’s nature is passive (suggested by passive voice): “What is wanted?” (2336)
- Narrator tolerates Bartleby. *Why?*

Narrator & Bartleby, Phase 1

- See 2338: “Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance.” Narrator doesn’t reject Bartleby because:
 - He tries to understand him imaginatively, sympathetically: “charitably construe to his imagination”
 - He feels good about himself for tolerating Bartleby: “delicious self-approval”
 - Bartleby “strangely disarmed” and “touched and disconcerted me” (2336)

Setting

- Subtitled “A Story of Wall-Street”: the chief financial street in New York
- “Wall” has symbolic meaning as well: see 2331, 2nd ¶: chambers face “white wall” of light shaft on one side; black brick wall on the other side
- 2335: Divider between narrator and scriveners; Bartleby is on the narrator’s side of divider, behind a screen, facing window looking out on wall



Wall Street, New York City, Trinity Church in Background

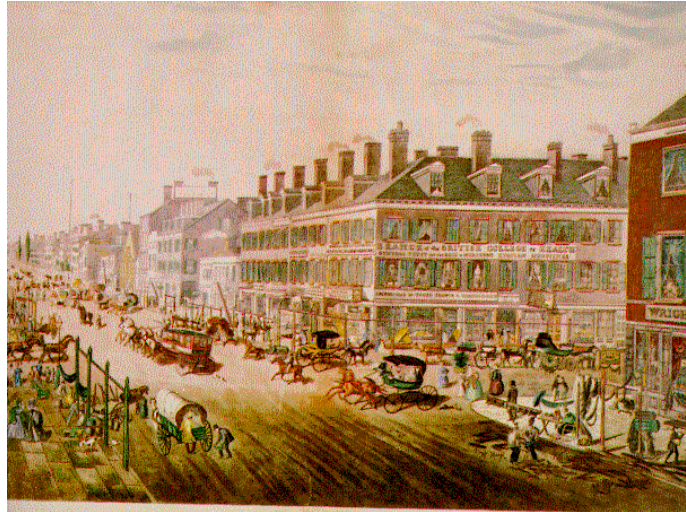


Setting

- Wall-Street, “deserted as Petra” (see picture, right, in modern-day Jordan), contrasts with “the bright silks and sparkling faces” of Broadway (2341)
- “the circumstance of being alone in a solitary office . . . Unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations” contributed to Colt’s murder of Adams (2347)



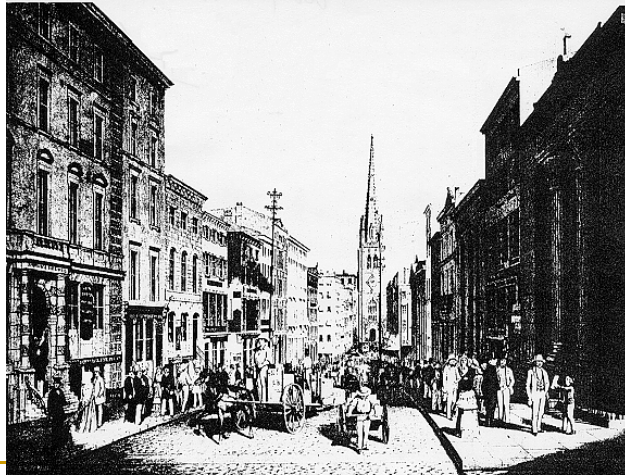
Broadway, mid-19th century



Narrator & Bartleby, Phase 2

- 2240-41: Narrator, on way to Trinity Church on Sunday, stops by office and finds Bartleby there
 - Bartleby's "gentlemanly *nonchalance*"
 - Narrator feels "unmanned" and complies to Bartleby's wishes
 - Finding that Bartleby has been living in the office, narrator is moved: feels "overpowering stinging melancholy" for first time: "For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam" (2341)

Wall-Street & Trinity Church



Narrator & Bartleby, Phase 3

- Narrator's recognizes Bartleby's "quiet mysteries"
 - Bartleby's "dead-wall reveries": "for long periods he would stand looking out, at his pale window behind the screen, upon the dead brick wall" (2342)
 - Melancholy → Fear → Repulsion: because pity goes against common sense if Bartleby can't be helped: "his soul I could not reach" (2342)

Narrator & Bartleby, Phase 3

- 2342-43: Narrator resolves to fire Bartleby if he refuses to answer questions
- “something superstitious knocking at my heart and forbidding me to carry out my purpose” (2343)

Narrator & Bartleby, Phase 4

- Bartleby gives up copying (2345)
- Narrator gives Bartleby 6 days notice, then asks him to leave, offers money
- Next morning, Bartleby is still there (2346)
- Narrator resorts to religion: “love one another” and Jonathan Edwards on predestination: “I penetrate the predestined purpose of my life. I am content” (2348)

Narrator & Bartleby, Phase 5

- 2349-50: Rumors about Bartleby threaten narrator's business and reputation
- Narrator resolves to change offices, departs
- "I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of" (2350)
- Bartleby remains, but narrator denies him: "the man you allude to is nothing to me" (2350)

Narrator & Bartleby, Phase 6

- Narrator is "held . . . to terrible account" regarding Bartleby; he fears "being exposed in the papers" (2351)
- Narrator interviews Bartleby in old premises: Bartleby: "I am not particular."
- Desperate, the narrator invites Bartleby to "to go home with me now" (2352); Bartleby prefers not to
- Narrator takes vacation: travels into suburbs in his "rockaway" carriage: "I almost lived in my rockaway" (2352)

Narrator & Bartleby, Phase 7

- Police take Bartleby to the Tombs prison “as a vagrant” (2352); Bartleby doesn’t resist
- Narrator visits Bartleby in Tombs
- Bartleby, free “to wander about the prison,” faces outer wall



Narrator & Bartleby, Phase 7

- Bartleby to Narrator: “I know you and I want nothing to say to you” (2353)
- Narrator contracts meals for Bartleby from Mr. Cutlets; Bartleby refuses
- Returning a few days later, narrator finds Bartleby dead, with eyes open, in prison yard

Sequel: “vague report”

- “Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington” (2355)
 - “On errands of life, these letters speed to death”;
“Ah Bartleby, Ah humanity!”
 - Bartleby is a dead letter; unable to communicate:
as a legal scrivener, he deals in dead language

Narrator and Bartleby as Doubles

Like Bartleby, the narrator:

- Is, as he describes Bartleby, “pitifully respectable” (2335)
- Is unambitious and passive
- Deals in dead letters
- Appears to have no real friends, family
- Becomes a vagrant—lives in his rockaway