

From Wall Street to Astor Place: Historicizing Melville's "Bartleby"

Barbara Foley *

In recent years critics have been calling for a regrouping of mid-nineteenth-century American literature—of the romance in particular—in politics and history. John McWilliams applauds the contemporary “challenge to the boundaryless and abstract qualities of the older idea of the Romance’s neutral territory.” George Dekker notes that recent attempts to “rehistoricize the American romance” have entailed an “insist[ence] that our major romancers have always been profoundly concerned with what might be called the mental or ideological ‘manners’ of American society, and that their seemingly anti-mimetic fictions both represent and criticize those manners.”¹ But Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” (1853) has to this point been exempted from a thoroughgoing historical recontextualization; its subtitle remains to be fully explained.

Not all readings of the tale, to be sure, have been “boundaryless and abstract.” Critics interested in the tale’s autobiographical dimension have interpreted it as an allegory of the writer’s fate in a market society, noting specific links with Melville’s own difficult authorial career. Scholars concerned with the story’s New York setting have discovered some important references to contemporaneous events. Marxist critics have argued that “Bartleby” offers a portrait of the increasing alienation of labor in the rationalized capitalist economy that took shape in the mid-nineteenth-century United States.² But such critical enterprises have remained largely separate, with the result that biography, historical contextualization, and ideological analysis have been pursued in different registers. Moreover, criticism of “Bartleby” [End Page 87] has rarely explored Melville’s interest or involvement in current social conflicts and political discourses; “Wall Street” has thus functioned largely as metonymy rather than as constitutive context and locale.

In this essay I shall argue that a familiarity with mid-nineteenth-century class struggles in New York—and with the contemporaneous discourse about these struggles—is indispensable to a complete understanding of “Bartleby.” In order to historicize the tale fully, however, it is necessary to engage in a certain amount of political—and, it turns out, psychoanalytic—detective work. History in “Bartleby” must be reconstructed from what has been repressed, fragmented, and displaced to the margins of the text. Certain of the narrator’s passing references—to John Jacob Astor, to Trinity Church, to “fears of a mob,” to paying rent and taxes—suggest a historical subtext that the Wall Street lawyer can only subliminally acknowledge. The tale’s very abstractness, then—its apparently “anti-mimetic” quality—is part of its object of critique; the “mental and ideological manners” that Melville represents include the narrator’s inability to see social relations as constituted by relations of economic power. But repression is working in “Bartleby” on another level as well. The Astor Place riot of 1849, I hypothesize, provides a covert historical subtext—one that is denied not so much by the narrator as by the author himself. In its ironic display of the narrator’s attempts to rationalize his acts in relation to his employee, “Bartleby” offers Melville’s critique of the workings of ideology; in its disguised paradigmatic plot of betrayal and guilt, the tale reveals Melville’s own attempt to contend with the return of the political unconscious.

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“Bartleby” takes place some time in the 1840s—although exactly when, as Charles Swann points out, is somewhat difficult to determine.³ The story is narrated retrospectively, leaving the impression that a significant period has intervened between the lawyer’s interactions with his intransigent employee and his later reflections on these events. The narration itself obviously occurs sometime before 1853 (the text’s date of publication) and after 1848 (the year of the death of John Jacob Astor, whose “rounded and orbicular” name the narrator “love[s] to repeat” because it “rings like unto bullion”; Astor is referred to as the “*late* John Jacob Astor” [italics added]).⁴ The [End Page 88] events constituting the story itself are somewhat harder to place, however. The narrator mentions that he hired Bartleby to help handle the increased workload accruing to the lawyer’s assumption of the position of Master of Chancery; he complains, however, that he enjoyed the benefits of this position for “only a few short years” because of the “sudden and violent abrogation” of the office by “the new Constitution” (14). The New York State Constitution was revised in 1846, providing for the abolition of the equity courts in the following year. If we figure that Bartleby spends about six months in the lawyer’s employ, and that “a few short years” intervene before 1847, the pallid scrivener probably appears on the lawyer’s doorstep around 1843 or 1844. This dating is supported by the narrator’s comparison of his emotional state with that of the businessman John C. Colt, who, in an uncontrolled rage, murdered the printer Samuel Adams in Adams’s office. It would seem that the famous case, which was brought to trial in 1842, is in fairly recent memory.⁵

But this 1843–1844 dating is made problematic by the narrator’s mention of his intended visit to Trinity Church on the Sunday when he finds Bartleby “keeping bachelor’s hall all by himself” (27) in the office at No. _ Wall Street. Trinity was consecrated, with great fanfare, in May of 1846; yet Melville’s lawyer makes no mention of its even being new. Moreover, when Bartleby ends up in the Tombs, the grub-man brings up the name of the

"gentleman forger" Monroe Edwards, who, he remarks, "died of consumption at Sing Sing" (44). Edwards—a flamboyant criminal who, David Reynolds remarks, "decorated his cell in the Tombs elegantly, like a parlor" and became something of a criminal folk hero—died in prison in 1847.⁶ If we date the events in "Bartleby" backwards from the abolition of the Courts of Chancery, and forwards from the consecration of Trinity and the death of Edwards, we immediately see that the story could not, strictly speaking, have taken place at all.

Perhaps it seems trivial to point up Melville's errors in setting up the chronology for his tale, particularly when we recognize that others of Melville's works—*Moby-Dick*, for example—manifest comparable discrepancies in time schemes.⁷ I draw attention to these mistakes, however, because they suggest that Melville's imaginative process in "Bartleby" required him to blend events from the early 1840s with events occurring later in the decade and perhaps into the 1850s. What sorts of social developments and historical occurrences might have **[End Page 89]** been crowding themselves into Melville's consciousness and compelling him to distort the historical record?

In the early 1840s, writes Sean Wilentz, the New York labor movement, which had been drastically set back by the panic of 1837, was relatively quiescent. By mid-decade, however, there was a labor resurgence: "A burst of strikes hit the city's bookbinding, upholstering, shoemaking, and tailoring shops; at the peak of what turned out to be a successful five-week strike, the tailors mounted a torchlight procession two thousand strong, led by two musical bands and men carrying the republican banners of old."⁸ In 1849 striking Hudson River Railroad workers attacked and killed several scabs;⁹ by 1850 there was continual conflict between police and bands of striking tailors, culminating in the August 1850 demonstrations in which two tailors were killed. By midcentury "there had been such a revival in the local labor movement that the *Tribune* could term it a 'general uprising,' . . . and the *Herald* warned workers against 'socialists,' 'Red Republicans,' and Horace Greeley."¹⁰ Walt Whitman, observing the spirit of revolt among New York's workers, wrote in 1850 that "in all of them burns, almost with a fierceness, the divine fire which more or less, during all ages, has only waited a chance to leap forth and confound the calculations of tyrants, hunkers, and all their tribe. At this moment, New York is the most radical city in America."¹¹

Class struggles in the streets of New York never attained the level of class consciousness or discipline that characterized the urban workers' uprisings of 1848 in Europe. By comparison, the New York riots and rebellions were, Luc Sante observes, "rampages, headless and tailless and flailing about."¹² Moreover, even in the 1840s and 1850s the politics of New York working-class movements were colored by the nativism and racism that would culminate in the 1863 Draft Riot. Nonetheless, the growing labor movement drew sustenance from a rhetoric of class warfare. As early as 1829, agrarian radical Thomas Skidmore had averred that "men have no right to their property (as they call it) when they use it, for the purpose of converting their fellow beings into slaves to labor for their use." Calling for a state constitutional convention that would abolish all rights of inheritance through wills, Skidmore called for an "equal division" of existing property among all state residents—including Indians.¹³ In the late 1840s, writes David Reynolds, such expressions of radical class consciousness became more polemical: "The labor theory of value, which had been discussed **[End Page 90]** rather abstractly by the rational socialists of the 1820s, now was vivified in increasingly lurid exposés detailing the vices of the wealthy 'upper ten' and the miseries of the oppressed 'lower million.'"¹⁴ A representative of the striking tailors, for example, proclaimed that the workers' goal must be "to prevent the growth of an unwholesome aristocracy, whose only aim is to acquire wealth by robbery of the toiling masses; to place themselves in a position to successfully combat capital; to bring labor up to its proper elevation and take that position which God intended man should fill—truly independent of his fellows, and above the position of a mere 'wage slave.'" Mike Walsh, an omnipresent radical of the 1840s, condemned "the slavery of wages" and proclaimed that "an overbearing employer" or a "tyrannical landlord" was "no democrat." He concluded, "No man can be a good political democrat without he's a good social democrat."¹⁵ Any New York City resident aware of current political debates—as Melville certainly was—could not have been oblivious to the omnipresent language of class polarization.

To be sure, "Bartleby" is not precisely a story about labor unrest. Turkey and Nippers, while driven to alcoholism and ulcers by low wages and psychologically debilitating work, do not possess the "divine fire" of rebellion.¹⁶ Bartleby, if arguably engaged in a "strange, mute sit-in,"¹⁷ hardly exudes proletarian class consciousness or "leaps forth" Whitman-style against his employer. Indeed, it has been argued that the social relations in the lawyer's office are in some ways more reflective of an earlier, more paternalist phase of capitalist development than of full-blown market capitalism.¹⁸ The narrator's various suggestions that the tale takes place in the early 1840s, a time of low ebb in class struggle, reinforce his view of the office as a seamless, organic, "natural" community. The narrator craves the good opinion of his employees and wishes to consider both himself and them as "sons of Adam" (28). His final sigh—"Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" (45)—reveals his desire to articulate an abstract humanism that will include both himself and the scrivener.

If "Bartleby" does not depict class struggle directly, it is, as David Kuebrich has pointed out, very much about ideological struggle as well as alienation; indeed, the conflict between Bartleby and his boss cannot be understood apart from the contemporaneous discourse about class polarization. The narrator treats his employees like wage slaves: he erects screens and barriers between himself and them; he **[End Page 91]** views them as "useful" and "valuable"; and he reduces individuality to idiosyncrasy, viewing the scriveners' peculiarities (including their poverty) as intrinsic rather than caused by their relation to him. He offers charity rather than higher wages and, when pressed to the wall (as it were), invokes property rights; fearing both social upheaval and the bad opinion of his professional peers, he allows state power to take its course and to cart Bartleby off to the Tombs of capitalist justice. That the lawyer is in some ways a kind and well-meaning man only reinforces the tale's critique of ideology as justificatory practice: his "doctrine of assumptions" takes as a premise the legitimacy and necessity of capitalist social relations.¹⁹

Marxist critics of "Bartleby" have at times been faulted for superimposing upon the tale anachronistic conceptions of class antagonism and false consciousness.²⁰ A consideration of the political discourses of the 1840s, however, reveals that Melville's characterizations do invoke the familiar

contemporaneous categories of the false democrat and the wage slave. Moreover, the tale's various indications of being set in the late 1840s or even the early 1850s suggest that the narrator's vague paranoia (his "fears . . . of a mob," [40]) belies his paternalistic complacency and registers the increasingly violent street activity and strident rhetoric that characterized the class struggles of this later period.²¹ But "Bartleby"'s links to the contemporaneous critique of the "upper ten" consist in more than its invocation of a generalized discourse of class warfare. The narrator's opening paean to John Jacob Astor unequivocally associates the teller of Melville's tale with the figure who more than any other symbolized in the popular mind the obscenity of great wealth. Mike Walsh singled out Astor for blistering attack:

[I]t would take thirty-five hundred men, working twenty years . . . three hundred days in each year, without being sick or out of employment an hour during the whole time, and getting a dollar a day without spending a cent, but living with their families on air like chameleons [*sic*], sleeping in the parks and going naked: yes! 3,500 men working that length of time, living in that manner and receiving that much wages, it would take to *earn* what Mr. John Jacob Astor has *saved* from what the world calls "his industry."²²

Astor, variously dubbed "Old Hunks," "Old Skinflint," and "the richest man in the country,"²³ was, Stephen Zelnick concludes, "probably [End Page 92] the most hated man in New York when he died in 1848."²⁴ Already in possession of most of lower Manhattan by the 1830s, Astor bought up much of what is now midtown Manhattan at bargain prices during the depression of 1837 and extended his domain beyond the island. When the lawyer in "Bartleby" flees his office for day trips in his rockaway, the places he visits are, significantly, all Astor terrain: Hoboken, across the Hudson River in New Jersey, was the site of the Astor mansion, while Astoria, across the East River in Queens, bears the name of its overlord.²⁵ By 1848 Astor was collecting \$200,000 a year in rents. Asked shortly before his death whether he had invested too much in real estate, Astor responded, "Could I begin life again, knowing what I now know, and had money to invest, I would buy every foot of land on the Island of Manhattan." When Astor died, his fortune was estimated at some twenty to thirty million.²⁶

Astor's right to his wealth by no means went unchallenged. In the mid-1800s, taxes were not imposed on income, and property taxes were, by present standards, very low. In 1850, for example, William B. Astor, John Jacob's primary inheritor, paid \$29,579.26 on property "assessed at \$2.6 million but probably worth ten times as much."²⁷ While some radicals, like Skidmore, advocated the abolition of all transfers of property through wills, inheritance taxes were generally seen as the principal means to prevent the development of a home-grown aristocracy. The obituaries on Astor were thus vocal in their demands that Astor's estate pay the taxes its founder had managed not to pay for so many years. Greeley's *Tribune* supported the movement to impose a massive tax on Astor's estate. It was unfair, the *Tribune* death notice stated, for the government to "protect Mr. Astor's houses, lands, ships, stocks, etc., and yet exact no direct taxes from him according to his income."²⁸ James Gordon Bennett's *Herald*, ordinarily anything but a radical paper, nonetheless invoked a loose version of the labor theory of value in its observation that

[d]uring the last fifty years of the life of John Jacob Astor, his property had been augmented and increased in value by the aggregate intelligence, industry, enterprise, and commerce of New York, fully to the amount of one-half its value. The farms and lots of ground which he bought forty, twenty, and ten and five years ago, have all increased in value entirely by the industry of the citizens of New York. Of course, it is plain as that two and two make four, that the [End Page 93] half of his immense estate, in its actual value, has accrued to him by the industry of the community.²⁹

"Astor" rang unto bullion for many New Yorkers, but they ordinarily repeated the name not to venerate it but to revile it.

What the debate over Astor's "right" to his millions reveals is that the critique of great wealth was inextricably tied to the critique of land ownership; the capitalist and the landlord were closely linked in the radical imaginary of the 1840s and 1850s. Correlatively, demands for an end to wage slavery were frequently conjoined with demands for land reform. The glutted labor market, radicals argued, depressed wages: if urban workers had the option to farm rural homesteads, the labor market would expand and wages would rise. Even though the movement for land reform in New York State targeted the patroons' large holdings upstate, its headquarters were in the Bowery in the 1840s. As Wilentz notes, "[B]y the mid-1840s, land reform had captured the imagination of almost every labor radical still active in New York."³⁰ George Evans, former editor of the *Working Man's Advocate*, declared in 1841 that "if any man has a right on earth, he has a right to land enough to raise a habitation on. If he has a *right to live*, he has a right to land enough for his subsistence. Deprive anyone of these rights, and you place him at the mercy of those who possess them." "An End to Land Monopoly" and "Our Public Lands: The Workingmen's Remedy" were toasts proposed at labor's 1843 Thomas Paine day celebrations. At the same time, land reformers backed union demands, calling themselves the National Industrial Congress and demanding the ten-hour day. The popular radical novelist George Lippard declared in 1852, "Land Freedom, Labor's Rights and Universal Happiness—The first two must be obtained before the last can be consummated."³¹ In 1859 a commentator on the U.S. political scene wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* that "the word Agrarians comprehends [Socialists, Communists, Fourierites, and so forth]."³²

Especially during the two years preceding the 1846 revision of the New York State Constitution, there was widespread agitation for land limitation and land reform. The conservative press warned that calling a Constitutional convention in 1845 would be a public danger, since the land reformers were advocating measures that were "wild," "utterly senseless," "fatal to society," and "destructive to all social and civil purposes."³³ Melville's lawyer, harboring his own personal grievance, [End Page 94] remembers the Constitutional revision for its abolition of the Chancery courts. Far more significant in the public debate over the New York State Constitution, however, was the issue of who should have the title to land.³⁴

A chapter in the debate over land rights in New York that bears specific relevance to "Bartleby" is the scandal that erupted in 1846–1847 over the Episcopal diocese's management of its real estate. Trinity Church—situated on Broadway at the foot of Wall Street—was the headquarters of the diocese and gave it its name. A wealthy institution and a major owner of real estate throughout lower Manhattan, Trinity began in the mid-1840s to be heavily burdened with debts incurred in constructing both a new building at the Trinity site and Grace Church, a luxurious church at Broadway and Tenth Street that was to be patronized by wealthy parishioners. Trinity had, moreover, extended long-term leases at below-market rates to a few affluent New Yorkers—central among these the Astor family, which "paid \$269 a year for some 350 lots on a lease that would not expire until 1866." There occurred a public outcry when, in the mid-1840s, Trinity retrenched by closing down a number of its missions in the poorer parts of the city, such as the Bowery and Five Points. Some ministers—including a relative of Melville's friend Richard Henry Dana Jr.—quit the diocese in protest. In 1846 some church members charged that Trinity had failed to use its wealth "to sustain the feeble, and to supply the destitute"; taking their own church fathers to court, they challenged Trinity's "moral and legal right to its lands." In 1847, the courts upheld Trinity's title—but "not before the public was treated to the spectacle of a high-toned brawl over the use and abuse of wealth." Radicals of the time added their commentary, verbal and symbolic. Mike Walsh, whose two "pet evils" were Trinity and Astor, "declared that Trinity's property, 'enough to make every person in the United States comfortable and happy,' should be confiscated for public use, and then followed this up by urging the city to take over St. John's Park on the grounds that it was an exclusive and privileged preserve from which the laboring class was excluded. Walsh demonstrated his contempt for Trinity's exclusiveness by climbing over the park's fence and walking on the forbidden ground."³⁵ Squatting, a time-honored practice in rural Anti-Rent movements, was also, it would appear, a weapon in the arsenal of urban radicals.

Astor and Trinity are thus implicated in "Bartleby" not only ideologically [End Page 95] but also geographically. For the overwhelming probability is that No. 1 Wall Street is either owned and rented by Astor; or owned and rented by Trinity; or leased at low cost to Astor, who then rents it out to the lawyer's landlord, who in turn rents office space to the lawyer. When the lawyer challenges Bartleby's right to remain in the office—"Do you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?" (35)—he invokes a language hardly innocent of political overtones. In the talk of the town, both Trinity and Astor were, in the late 1840s, repeatedly the target of similar questions about the legitimacy of their titles and business practices.

Bartleby's conduct becomes less freakish and idiosyncratic, more plausible and historically significant, I would argue, when seen in the full context of contemporaneous struggles and discourses over property rights. Any reader familiar with the Trinity controversy would not miss the irony inherent in the narrator's passing, en route to a sermon by a "celebrated preacher" at the power nexus of the Episcopal diocese, through a Wall Street "deserted as Petra" (26–27) and finding a homeless worker squatting in his chambers. Not only was Petra—"at one time . . . the Wall Street of Arabia"—familiar to many readers through contemporaneous travelers' accounts,³⁶ any reader knowledgeable about the dual campaign against land monopoly and wage slavery in the strategy and discourse of contemporaneous radicalism would recognize the appropriateness of Bartleby's chosen mode of rebellion. For Bartleby both withholds his labor power and asserts his right to terrain. Bartleby remains enclosed within the walls erected by privilege, while Mike Walsh scales them.³⁷ Both, however, challenge the existing state of property rights by asserting a prior and unconditional doctrine of human rights. Invoking a symbolic discourse current in the 1840s, both engage in an occupation of space that is, simultaneously, an assertion of humanity. As a "Story of Wall Street," then, "Bartleby" addresses not only the market in labor but also that in land, not only exploitation but also homelessness. Its portrait of alienation is devastatingly complete.

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Thus far I have been arguing that an awareness of certain features of New York social history of the 1840s and 1850s validates—indeed, expands—the Marxist line of interpretation on "Bartleby." Implicit in this argument, however, has been the assumption that Melville's repression [End Page 96] of history to the margins of the tale is, in the broadest sense, *intentional*. That is, Melville is consciously ironizing his narrator: the historically informed reader sees, but the lawyer does not, the fuller meaning of the text's references to Astor, Trinity, and the revised New York Constitution, as well as to mobs, taxes, rights, and rents. The text's apparent projection of Bartleby as a metaphysical creature, rootless and timeless, functions primarily as a revelation of the narrator's false consciousness, pointing to what Michael Paul Rogin calls "the historical triumph of abstraction" in the era of capitalist market relations.³⁸ Like Captain Delano in "Benito Cereno," the lawyer-narrator in "Bartleby" exhibits a consciousness that cannot think concretely because it cannot afford to face the exploitative basis of social relations—for reasons that ring unto bullion.³⁹ The lawyer's comment that the walls of his office building have closed off "a lateral view of certain grimy backyards and bricks" (16) can thus be taken as Melville's oblique commentary on his narrator's own fetishized consciousness.

What I would like to suggest now—and here, admittedly, the entire tenor of my argument becomes a good deal more provisional and hypothetical—is that there is another historical subtext in "Bartleby," one that Melville cannot entirely control because he is not fully aware of it. The nodal event in this repressed narrative is the Astor Place riot of 1849, which is denied direct articulation for reasons that ring not of bullion but (if I may be pardoned the pun) of bullets. Clustered about Melville's immediate reaction to and later memory of the 1849 riot, I suggest, are political conflicts and ambiguities so intensely troubling as to require expression in displaced and symptomatic form. In order to argue for the central importance of the 1849 riot as an absent presence in Melville's tale, however, I shall have to triangulate among various pieces of "evidence": certain known facts about Melville's life, the events of the riot itself, and Melville's 1854 diptych tale, "The Two Temples." The "proof" for my argument, I am aware, will consist in its plausibility and interpretive suggestiveness rather than in its empirical verifiability.

Melville was hunting whales on the *Acushnet* when John Colt came to trial for the murder of Adams and Monroe Edwards came to trial for forgery. By 1847, however, the recently married Melville was living at 103 Fourth Avenue, two blocks from Astor Place, a few short blocks from the house of John Jacob Astor, and right behind Grace Church. Until the fall of 1849, Melville lived in New York, writing in the mornings, [End Page 97] walking down

to the New York Society Library every afternoon to peruse the newspapers (of which he was an avid reader),⁴⁰ and taking in occasional performances at the newly constructed Astor Place Opera House. Apart from his family (he lived with his married brother Allan—who was, incidentally, a Wall Street lawyer—in order to share household expenses for the large number of dependents), Melville at this time associated primarily with the literary wing of the Young America movement, which included such figures as the novelist Cornelius Mathews and the editors and literary publicists George and Evert Duyckinck. Self-styled literary nationalists, the adherents of Young America supported and promoted Melville in the early phases of his career. The literary Young Americans were progressive in some respects: Evert Duyckinck listened with delight to Melville's reading of a parody of Astor's will that appeared in the *Herald* in April 1848 and approved the reworking of this and similarly satiric political material in *Mardi*, of which Duyckinck wrote one of the few favorable reviews appearing in the spring of 1849.⁴¹

But Mathews and the Duyckincks were conservatives in other respects. Where the political wing of Young America "welcomed the 1848 revolutions," notes Rogin, the European uprisings made Evert Duyckinck "nervous"; "[h]is fear of disorder placed him closer to his northeastern Whig enemies than to the Democracy."⁴² Evert Duyckinck was also "a good, active Episcopalian," Hershel Parker observes, one who "bridled at whatever favored airy transcendentalisms or slighted organized Christianity."⁴³ Duyckinck even attempted to warn Melville off Emerson.⁴⁴ As early as November 1848, Parker asserts, Melville, while grateful for the Duyckincks' publicizing efforts, was beginning to chafe against their continuing expectation that he would bury his views and perform literary hackwork for them.⁴⁵ Moreover, even as he was consorting with this socially conservative cultural elite, Melville was writing novels—*Mardi*, *Redburn*, and *White-Jacket*—manifesting his profound discomfort with elites and hierarchies of various kinds. By the late 1840s, Melville was living an increasingly intolerable contradiction.

In the fall of 1849—after purchasing two volumes of the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*—Melville traveled to England and the Continent.⁴⁶ Returning in early 1850, he began work on *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, settled in the Berkshires, and formed his intense friendship with Hawthorne. Evert Duyckinck, Mathews, the historian Joel C. [End Page 98] Headley, and other Young Americans were present at the famous expedition up Monument Mountain in the summer of 1850 when Melville met Hawthorne and debated cultural politics with Oliver Wendell Holmes and other Bostonians. But Melville was gradually becoming more distant from the New York crowd in the early 1850s. Indeed, Parker opines that Melville may have moved to the Berkshires to "get away from the pettiness of the New York literati."⁴⁷ Melville dropped his subscription to the *Literary World* in February 1852;⁴⁸ in August of that year the Duyckincks published a "shocked review" of *Pierre*. Yet the Melville who in 1853 turned to the composition of magazine stories and sketches—of which "Bartleby" was the earliest published piece—was still in many respects living the conventional life of a middle-class man of letters. Indeed, because of the poor sales of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, Melville had become more dependent than ever on the generosity of a father-in-law with whose politics, Carolyn Karcher argues, he must have been in deep conflict on many key points.⁴⁹ Even though Melville had broken with some of his more conservative literary associates by the time he began work on "Bartleby" in the summer of 1853, then, he continued to inhabit a conflicted social and political position.

Our story now shifts back some four years. On 10 May 1849 New York was shaken by the violence of the Astor Place riot. The high-toned British tragedian William Charles Macready had been invited to play Macbeth at the Astor Place Opera House at the same time that a popular American actor, Edwin Forrest, was scheduled to act the same role at a theater in the Bowery. A long-brewing rivalry between the two actors was readily incorporated into preexisting discourses of class and nation in a city already polarized by the labor struggles of the late 1840s. Proponents of Forrest crowded into the Astor Place Opera House on 7 May, and when Macready appeared, they drowned out his lines and pelted him with rotten eggs, vegetables, coins, and bottles of assafoetida. According to the *Tribune*, Macready reacted with aplomb: he "picked up one of the pennies and very coolly placed it in his bosom."⁵⁰ The demonstrators' slogans reflected the contradictory impulses of contemporaneous working-class consciousness: castigations of the white-shirted, white-gloved rich blended with the ironic salute, "Three cheers for Macready and Nigger Douglass!"⁵¹ The next day, a portion of the same group, "still glowing with their success at the Opera House the night before, broke up the anniversary [End Page 99] meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society at the Broadway Tabernacle [and] . . . made an unsuccessful attempt to disrupt the proceedings of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in the same building."⁵²

The city's elite reacted in dismay to the attack on Macready. In the *Literary World*, the Duyckincks praised Macready for conducting himself with "the highest magnanimity" and condemned the incident as a "gross and unprovoked . . . outrage" perpetrated by a "brutal mob." Dealing with the consequences of the disruption, they concluded, "is a matter for the police not for the critic."⁵³ A group of forty-seven prominent citizens published an open letter to Macready in the *Herald*, urging him to continue his performances:

DEAR SIR: The undersigned, having heard that the outrage at the Astor Place Opera House, on Monday evening, is likely to have the effect of preventing you from concluding your intended farewell engagement on the American stage, take this public method of requesting you to reconsider your decision, and of assuring you that the good sense and respect for order prevailing in this community, will sustain you on the subsequent nights of your performance.⁵⁴

This letter, which amounted to a guarantee of police protection, was signed by the Duyckincks, Washington Irving, and Mathews, as well as a number of leading municipal figures, including Francis B. Cutting, Mordecai M. Noah, and Samuel M. Ruggles. Also among the signatories was Herman Melville.⁵⁵

When the letter appeared, anonymous threats were made to several of the signers who lived north of the Opera House around Union Square. A countermanifesto was issued by the supporters of Forrest:

WORKINGMEN
SHALL
AMERICANS OR ENGLISH RULE
IN THIS CITY?

The crew of the English steamer has threatened all Americans who shall dare to express their opinion this night at the English Aristocratic Opera House! We advocate no violence, but a free expression of opinion to all public men!

WORKINGMEN! FREEMEN!
STAND BY YOUR
LAWFUL RIGHTS.⁵⁶ [End Page 100]

When Macready decided that the show must go on, the *Herald* editors, anticipating further disturbances, gleefully noted, "The rioters will be well-licked tonight, or the city again disgraced."⁵⁷

Macready returned to the stage on 10 May. Once again, a disturbance erupted inside the theater. This time, however, the police were prepared: the demonstrators were pushed out to join the thousands thronged in the street. After members of the crowd tossed a few volleys of rocks, the police fired on them, killing twenty-two people, including an eight-year-old boy. Another nine people subsequently died of wounds, and as many as forty-eight more civilians were injured by the police, including a Wall Street lawyer who was crossing Lafayette Place at the wrong time and an elderly woman "sitting in her own room at the corner of Lafayette-Place, [who] was shot in the side."⁵⁸

Nothing daunted, Macready attempted to rehearse *Richelieu* the next day, but the Opera House was closed; he rapidly left New York. There was a massive rally at City Hall Park, at which Mike Walsh proclaimed that "[n]ot in the whole history of the civilized world has there ever been committed an atrocity equal to that which was perpetrated last night. . . . If such a thing had occurred in Paris, the streets would have been soon filled with barricades raised against the cut-throats, with the Mayor at their head."⁵⁹ The press was sharply divided in its response to the riot. The Duyckincks, in the *Literary World*, bemoaned the "[m]elancholy circumstances under which Mr. Macready leaves the country" and praised the open letter as a tribute to "Mr. Macready and his honored position, gained by the most noble devotion to his Art." The *Literary World* further opined, the "Astor Opera House Riot will be remembered in connexion with a great principle—that of the supremacy of law over brute violence."⁶⁰ The *Herald*, on 16 May, fulminated against Greeley's *Tribune* as an "organ of French socialism and kindred abominations" and meditated on how much mischief "may have been wrought amongst ourselves, by this continual harping upon the tyranny and oppression of the rich." On 29 May, however, the *Herald* also noted, "We advise the proprietors of the Massacre Place Opera House to convert it into a church—into a place for hearing sermons, and singing of psalms, and making prayers, and repenting of sin, for assuredly there has been enough of sin committed in that region to be repented of in sackcloth and ashes." The *Philadelphia Ledger* asserted that the riot proved that there was in New York "what every patriot has considered it his duty to deny—a *high* and a *low* class." Horace Greeley's *Tribune* interpreted the riot as the outgrowth [End Page 101] of the class antagonisms resulting from rapid urbanization: "Is there no means," Greeley asked, "of preventing so many young men from rushing to the cities, of giving the less fortunate, the poor, a direct personal interest in the property and order of society, so that when it is attacked they shall feel that they are themselves attacked?" The *Journal of Commerce*, arguing that the Opera House should have been closed after the events of 8 May, made the provocative charge that the signers of the open letter to Macready "were mainly instrumental in bringing this calamity on our city."⁶¹

Although Melville lived only two blocks from the site where twenty-five thousand demonstrators gathered on 10 May, his papers contain no direct reference to the Astor Place riot. Nor do they mention his role in signing the open letter or his reaction to the press coverage of the incident. There is no "mea culpa" on record. We can therefore only speculate about what his reactions might have been. There is no reason to assume that Melville signed the open letter under duress. Quite possibly the racism and nativism of the demonstrators repelled the imagination that would figure the *Pequod* as the ship of mankind. Possibly he found this mob, like other mobs, terrifying. The representation of the grotesque starving throng receiving the leavings of the Lord Mayor's banquet in "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs" (1854), while reverberating with moral outrage, also reveals not a little fear of the uncontrolled masses. "The House-Top," written in reaction to the 1863 draft riot, proclaims that "[t]he Town is taken by its rats" and expresses revulsion at the "Atheist roar of riot."⁶²

All the same, it is difficult to believe that the novelist who in the spring of 1849 was writing so angrily of class polarization in *Redburn* and planning his condemnation of flogging in *White-Jacket* could have been unaware of and untroubled by the implications of the position he had taken. Most of those killed by the police at Astor Place had not, after all, been involved in the attacks on antislavery meetings on 8 May; some were just bystanders.⁶³ Almost all were the sorts of workers or self-employed laborers celebrated in Whitman's "Song of Occupations": "machinists, butchers, clerks, marble cutters, plumbers, cork merchants, shoemakers, paper folders, carpenters, and gunsmiths." Moreover, the open letter that Melville had signed in the company of New York's literary and social elite was subsequently viewed by at least one newspaper—the *Journal of Commerce*—as a death warrant. The Melville who had lampooned Astor's will the year [End Page 102] before was now aligning himself with Washington Irving, whose popular *Astoria: or, Anecdotes of an Enterprise beyond the Rocky Mountains* (1836) saw the expression of manifest destiny in Astor's fur-trading empire.⁶⁴ In short, Melville had joined ranks with those who had contributed to and then defended the conversion of Astor Place into "Massacre Place." It is difficult to believe that Melville did not experience at least some feelings of guilt and regret about the side that he had ended up taking in what proved

to be one of the sharpest manifestations of class conflict in the New York of the 1840s—at least in terms of violence—indeed, perhaps the closest U.S. equivalent to the Paris barricades of 1848.

"Bartleby," I am suggesting, is, in disguised and displaced form, the missing "mea culpa" in the corpus of Melville's works. Consider the parallels between the situations of the lawyer and Melville. Both are identified with the power and prestige of the name of Astor. Both encounter indecorous behavior on the part of a proletariat refusing to quit the premises. Both entertain "fears of a mob." Both succumb to pressure from peers and endorse the summoning of state power. Both indirectly contribute to the deaths of those who have defied accepted standards of property, "right," and conduct. In his satirical portrait of the lawyer in "Bartleby," Melville is not simply exposing the ideological blindness and moral failure of a typical citizen of Wall Street; he is also, I suggest, working through his ambivalence about his complicity in the events that transpired at "Massacre Place." Indeed, this ambivalence may help to illuminate a key point of contention among critics of "Bartleby"—namely, the extent to which Melville ironizes his narrator's would-be humanism or, conversely, appears to sympathize with his narrator's situation. Reading "Bartleby" in the context of the urban struggles of the 1840s—specifically, of the Astor Place riot—enables us to understand the tale as simultaneously an expression of Melville's contempt for bourgeois moral cowardice and an admission of his own identification with this quality. Melville knows his narrator so well because he carries aspects of the lawyer within himself.⁶⁵

This reading of "Bartleby" as an expression of Melville's uneasiness with his class partisanship in these events of 1849 is corroborated when another of his magazine sketches of the early 1850s—"The Two Temples"—is read in the same historical context. "The Two Temples," a diptych Melville wrote in 1854, was rejected for publication because of its harsh and pointed satire of New York's Episcopalian [End Page 103] elite. In this sketch, Melville contrasts his first-person narrator's humiliating experience in being excluded from a wealthy Episcopal church (its location three miles north of the Battery marks it as Grace Church) with his sense of ease in the inexpensive working-class section of the Royal Lyceum theater in London, where he is the recipient of various small gestures of welcome and kindness from other occupants of the gallery. The sketch patently sets up an opposition between the cold and unchristian behavior of the Episcopalian elite, whose beadle denies the narrator entry to the church because of his shabby clothing, and the generosity of the "quiet, well-pleased working-men, and their glad wives and sisters" who are willing to share what little they have. The narrator concludes by contrasting his reception in the two "temples": "a stranger in a strange land, I found sterling charity in the one; and at home, in my own land, was thrust out from the other."⁶⁶

In "The Two Temples," as in "Bartleby," Melville explores issues of charity and hypocrisy that will receive their fullest treatment in *The Confidence-Man*. But the two short pieces are linked not only by this general thematic convergence but also by multiple narrative parallels. In the first part of "The Two Temples," the narrator specifies that in order to reach the church he had to "tram[p] this blessed Sunday morning, all the way from the Battery, three long miles, . . . prayerbook under arm" (303). Denied entry because of his shabby appearance, the narrator sneaks up to the bell tower past the "great, fat-paunched, beadle-faced man" (313) who guards the door. Up in the porch, the narrator is directly exposed to the brilliant light streaming through the stained-glass windows but is prevented from seeing the people below because of the "fine-woven, gauzy wire-work" (305) of an obstructing screen. He muses, "[I]t was but a gorgeous dungeon, for I could n't look out, any more than if I had been the occupant of a basement cell in 'the Tombs'" (305). Even though he has been excluded, the narrator participates privately in the church service: "Though an insider in one respect, yet am I but an outsider in another. But for all that, I will not be defrauded of my natural rights" (305). Viewing "the theatric wonder of the populous spectacle of this sumptuous sanctuary" through the filter of the screen, he sees the white-robed priest read from the text, leave the altar, and reenter wearing black. "Book in hand, responses on my tongue, standing in the very posture of devotion," the narrator remarks, "I could not rid my soul of the intrusive [End Page 104] thought that, through some necromancer's glass, I looked down upon some sly enchanter's show" (306). The priest proceeds to deliver to his wealthy parishioners a sermon based on the text, "Ye are the salt of the earth." When the congregation leaves, the narrator realizes that he has been locked in, "left alone and solitary in a temple which but a moment before was more populous than many villages" (307). To gain release from his prison, he sets up a riot in the bells, prompting the beadle to have him arrested as a "lawless violator, and a remorseless disturber of the Sunday peace" (309).

The connections between the first part of "The Two Temples" and "Bartleby" are rich and suggestive. To begin with, Grace Church was centrally implicated in the Trinity scandal, since it was one of the lavish buildings constructed from the sacrifice of Trinity's missions at the Bowery and Five Points. Living in the posh area around Astor Place, Melville was dwelling in the shadow of Grace Church—in more senses than one—at the moment when the Episcopal diocese's financial and moral affairs were figuring prominently in the newspapers that he habitually read. The description of the fat "beadle-faced" man guarding the first "temple" apparently captured without ambiguity the physical appearance of Isaac Brown, sexton of Grace Church. Charles F. Briggs, explaining to Melville his reason for rejecting the sketch at *Putnam's*, noted that "the moral of the Two Temples would array against us the whole power of the pulpit, to say nothing of Brown, and the congregation of Grace Church."⁶⁷ Yet in "The Two Temples" Grace Church is also defamiliarized and resituated in its relation to Wall Street. The narrator is not a neighbor of the church, but an alien: he ascends from the Battery, the lower tip of Manhattan, close in fact to Wall Street, where Bartleby makes his lonely domicile. In his shabby coat, the narrator in "The Two Temples" might be Bartleby—or Turkey or Nippers, for that matter—trying to visit Trinity. Moreover, the description of the interior of the church in "The Two Temples" recalls the plan not of Grace Church but of Trinity Church. According to Beryl Rowland, various features of the building in the sketch—the location and height of the platform, the stained-glass windows, the view of the altar available from the tower—bear no resemblance to any features of Grace Church but are virtually identical with those of Trinity Church, where Melville visited and climbed around with his brother-in-law in January of 1848. By collapsing Grace and Trinity, Melville manages, Rowland notes, "to assail simultaneously [End Page 105] the ostentation and the superficial Christianity of the two newest and most Fashionable churches in New York."⁶⁸ But Melville also slyly links the church located around the corner from the site of the Astor Place riot with the church where the lawyer in "Bartleby" goes to get his weekly dose of morality, as well as where Mike Walsh scaled the fence and performed his squatter's sit-in.

What happens inside the church also meaningfully parallels what happens in "Bartleby"—with the signal difference that the narrator here takes the position not of the defender of the "Sunday peace" but of the invader. In fact, the narrator in "The Two Temples" resembles Bartleby in several ways. Like Bartleby, he finds himself sealed off from the rest of humanity by a screen, one that permits sound but limits vision. Just as Bartleby continually faces walls—the black and white walls outside the Wall Street office windows, the "Egyptian masonry" of the Tombs—the narrator in "The Two Temples" has his view blocked and compares his perch with "a basement cell in the Tombs."⁶⁹ In insisting upon occupying his isolated space, the narrator acknowledges his "outsider" status but, in a phrase invoking the rhetoric of contemporaneous radicalism from Skidmore to Walsh, asserts his "natural rights." When he is left alone in the church, the "Two Temples" narrator, like Bartleby on a Sunday, finds himself inhabiting a deserted scene formerly "more populous than many villages." And, as in Bartleby's case, the narrator's attempt to occupy a space that is socially used but privately owned leads to his being branded "lawless" and handed over to the state.

In other words, in a number of its key narrative details, as well as in its paradigmatic structure, the first part of "The Two Temples" offers Melville the opportunity to retell the events in the earlier tale—this time, however, from the point of view of the disenfranchised. The identification with Bartleby is by no means complete, for the narrator in the later sketch retains a degree of class privilege: when he goes to court, he notes, "my rather gentlemanly appearance procured me a private hearing from the judge" (309). Apparently the shabby coat is not the only one the narrator owns.⁷⁰ Moreover, he retains the air of wondering naïveté that Melville assigns to other quasi-autobiographical speakers in the diptych sketches: the author who frames the text's multiple ironies knows much more than the narrator who experiences them. If the narrator in "Bartleby" articulates the aspect of Melville that is acquainted with bourgeois complacency and cowardice from the inside, [End Page 106] then the narrator in "The Two Temples" articulates the Melville who is alien, subversive, and slightly manic, setting up a clamorous alarm of whose full meaning he seems not fully aware.

The first part of "The Two Temples" expands the critique of Trinity adumbrated in "Bartleby"; it corroborates those readings of the tale that stress Melville's detestation of oppressive hierarchy and his sympathy with aliens and rebels. The second part of "The Two Temples" draws on contemporaneous history in a different way; it introduces a key figure in the repressed subtext of the Astor Place riot—namely, the tragedian Macready. For when the narrator attends the Royal Lyceum theater in London, the actor on the stage is none other than "the stately Macready in the part of Cardinal Richelieu" (311). Looking around the theater, the narrator notes with pleasure that "[s]uch was the decorum of this special theater, that nothing objectionable was admitted within its walls" (314). Moreover, he praises Macready as "an amiable gentleman, combining the finest qualities of social and Christian respectability, with the highest excellence in his particular profession, for which last he had conscientiously done much, in many ways, to refine, elevate, and chasten" (314). Yet, when Macready begins to speak, the narrator experiences a sense of *deja vu*:

How marvellous this personal resemblance! He looks every inch to be the self-same, stately priest I saw irradiated by the glow-worm dyes of the pictured windows from my high tower-pew. And shining as he does, in the rosy reflexes of these stained walls and gorgeous galleries, the mimic priest down there; he too seems lit by Gothic blazonings.—Hark! the same measured, courtly, noble tone. See! the same imposing attitude. Excellent actor is this Richelieu! (315)

Watching Macready, the narrator muses, "Do I dream, or is it genuine memory that recalls some similar thing seen through the woven wires?" (315). When Macready finishes his performance, the narrator notes approvingly: "[T]he enraptured thousands sound their responses, deafeningly; unmistakably sincere. Right from the undoubted heart" (315).

Critics of "The Two Temples" routinely treat as unproblematic the narrator's claim to have found true charity and community in the London theater. The "similar thing" that the narrator discerns in the priest and the tragedian is read as heightening the contrast between essence and appearance: the priest flatters his wealthy listeners into believing [End Page 107] they are the "salt of the earth," while the actor, unabashed in his pretense, delivers genuine human value to those who genuinely are the salt of the earth. It is pointed out, moreover, that Melville dedicated the sketch to the actor Sheridan Knowles—a gesture indicating his respect for the tragedian's art.⁷¹ But what this line of interpretation overlooks is historical context. For *Richelieu*, we will recall, was the play that Macready, in a gesture of remarkable coldheartedness, attempted to rehearse at the Opera House the morning after the murderous police attack at Astor Place. Even if Melville admired great tragedians, it is difficult to believe that he did not intend an oblique reference to the events of 1849 in specifying Richelieu as the role played by Macready in this sketch of 1854.

What is more, Melville's own experiences in London theaters in the fall of 1849 diverge significantly from his delineation of them in "The Two Temples." Melville visited the Royal Lyceum Theatre on 7 November and bought a shilling ticket in the gallery, which he enjoyed for its "quite decent people" and the presence of a "fellow going round with a coffee pot & mugs crying 'Porter, gents, porter!'" The performers at the Lyceum, however, were Madame Vestris and Charles Mathews. Melville saw Macready—not in *Richelieu* but in *Othello*—on 19 November at the Haymarket Theatre.⁷² He wrote of this performance in his journal: "McReady [*sic*] painted hideously. Did'nt like him very much upon the whole—bad voice, it seemed."⁷³ Thus the narrator's praise of Macready in "The Two Temples" for his "qualities of Christian respectability," "noble tone," and "imposing attitude" runs directly counter to Melville's own impressions of the actor. The narrator's language echoes, if anything, the lofty estimate of Macready and Macready's art that accompanied the Duyckincks' castigation of the Bowery's citizenry for their behavior on 8 and 10 May 1849. The narratorial voice speaking approvingly of the lack of anything "objectionable" at Macready's London *Richelieu* performance therefore invites an at least partially ironic reading. Like the narrator of "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," who fails to analyze the "inverted similitude" that he discerns between the lawyers who consume and the millworkers who produce, the man who addresses the reader in "The Two Temples" comes nowhere near understanding the "similar thing" he has intuited in the sexton of Part I and the actor of Part II.

The path from "The Two Temples" back to "Bartleby" is circuitous but worth treading. Part I of the sketch suggests the passion with [End Page 108] which the Melville of 1854 had come to reject all that Trinity stood for; it is well-nigh impossible to picture the portrayer of the "beadfaced man" going out and purchasing prayer books for christenings, as Melville in fact did in 1849. Moreover, the first section of the diptych places the narrator in a position analogous to Bartleby's and implies a strong identification with the outcast who asserts his "natural rights" and disrupts the Sunday peace. The second section, by contrast, offers an ironic representation of the "stately Macready" that may be read as Melville's repudiation of his earlier support for the actor and perhaps by extension of his partisanship in the Astor Place riot as well. From the vantage point of this rearticulation of Macready, the reading of the paradigmatic plot of "Bartleby" as a tale of betrayal and guilt—as an expression of Melville's inchoate and largely unacknowledged regret in having aligned himself, however inadvertently, with the resonant name of Astor—gains credibility. The lawyer's irrational clinging to the scrivener—"him whom I had so longed to be rid of" (39)—takes shape not only as a subliminal recognition of his felt moral implication in the scrivener's fate but also, we may speculate, as a covert expression of the author's own implication in the fates of those who died at Astor Place.

"Bartleby" is a "Story of Wall Street," I hope I have shown, not only in its allusions to specific persons and events connected to conflicts between the rulers and the ruled in midcentury New York but also in its participation in contemporaneous discourses about class relations and property rights. In part these allusions and this participation are directed and deliberate, producing a controlled ironic framework within which the reader is invited to judge the inadequacies and hypocrisies of the tale's narrator. In part, however, Melville's treatment of this material is displaced and fragmentary, producing an irony and an ambiguity that are not always guided by a consistent authorial perspective. Just as there are issues of ethics and social responsibility that the Wall Street lawyer feels compelled to raise but cannot fully face, there are comparable moral—indeed political—issues that Melville himself allows to surface but then drives to the corners of his text. "Bartleby" gains in richness and complexity when read, in the context of 1840s New York social history, as Melville's ringing of the bells—both purposive and manic—against Astor and Trinity.

Rutgers University, Newark

Notes

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1. John McWilliams, "The Rationale for 'The American Romance,'" *boundary 2* 17 (spring 1990): 81; George Dekker, "Once More: Hawthorne and the Genealogy of American Romance," *ESQ* 35 (first quarter 1989): 82.

2. The first grouping of critics is represented by Lewis Mumford, "Melville's Miserable Years," in *Bartleby the Inscrutable: A Collection of Commentary on Herman Melville's Tale "Bartleby, the Scrivener,"* ed. M. Thomas Inge (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1979), 57–60; and Leo Marx, "Melville's Parable of the Walls," in Inge, 84–113. The second grouping is represented by Walter H. Eitner, "The Lawyer's Rockaway Trips in 'Bartleby, the Scrivener,'" *Melville Society Extracts* 78 (September 1989): 14–16; Charles Swann, "Dating the Action of 'Bartleby,'" *Notes and Queries* 32 (September 1985): 357–58; T. H. Giddings, "Melville, the Colt-Adams Murder, and 'Bartleby,'" *Studies in American Fiction* 2 (1974): 123–32; and Hans Bergmann, "'Turkey on His Back': 'Bartleby' and New York Words," *Melville Society Extracts* 90 (September 1992): 16–19. The third grouping is represented by Louise K. Barnett, "Bartleby as Alienated Worker," *Studies in Short Fiction* 11 (1974): 379–85; Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985); David Kuebrich, "Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in 'Bartleby,'" *New England Quarterly* 69 (September 1996): 381–405; and James C. Wilson, "'Bartleby': The Walls of Wall Street," *Arizona Quarterly* 37 (winter 1981): 335–46.

3. Swann, "Dating the Action of 'Bartleby,'" 357–58.

4. Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1869*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, G. Thomas Tanselle, et al. (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and The Newberry Library, 1987), 14; all subsequent quotations from "Bartleby" are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

5. See Giddings, "Melville, the Colt-Adams Murder, and 'Bartleby,'" 123–32. The chronological placement of the main action of "Bartleby" in 1843 is supported by the dating of a source that some critics consider seminal to Melville's tale—namely, a short piece entitled "The Lawyer's Story, Or, the Wrongs of the Orphans; By a Member of the Bar," which appeared in both the *New-York Times* and the *New York Tribune* in February of 1853. The story begins, "In the summer of 1843, having an extraordinary quantity of deeds to copy, I engaged, temporarily, an extra copying clerk, who interested me considerably, in consequence of his modest, quiet, gentlemanly demeanor, and in his intense application to his duties" (cited in Johannes Dietrich Bergmann, "'Bartleby' and 'The Lawyer's Story,'" *American Literature* 47 [November 1975]: 433).

6. David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 296.

7. Harrison Hayford, letter to author, 16 December 1992.
8. Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), 350.
9. See Richard Moody, *The Astor Place Riot* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1958), 177.
10. Helene Zahler, *Eastern Workingmen and National Land Policy, 1829–1862* (1941; reprint, New York: Greenwood, 1969), 69–70.
11. Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence of Walt Whitman*, 6 vols., ed. Haviland Miller (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1961–1977), 1:46.
12. Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991), 340.
13. Thomas Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property! Being a Proposition to Make It Equal among the Adults of the Present Generation* (1829; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, n.d.), 5, 137–38.
14. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 81.
15. Mike Walsh, quoted in Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 378, 331.
16. Thomas Pribek, "Melville's Copyists: The 'Bar-Tenders' of Wall Street," *Papers on Language and Literature* 22 (spring 1986): 176–86.
17. John M. Green, "Bartleby, the Perfect Pupil," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 7 (March 1993): 71.
18. See Allan Silver, "The Lawyer and the Scrivener," *Partisan Review* 48, No. 3 (1981): 409–24.
19. Kuebrich, "Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions," 381–405. While the lawyer represents his tolerance for his workers' idiosyncracies as a function of his charitable spirit, it is worth noting that the labor market in the late 1840s and early 1850s was tight, and bosses often had no choice but to keep on workers who were alcoholic or otherwise less than fully productive; see Richard B. Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis: Class, Ethnicity, and Youth in Antebellum New York City* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), 148–49. Sheila Post-Lauria argues that an ironic reading of the narrator's closing words is supported by Melville's choice to send "Bartleby" to Putnam's rather than to Harper's. Stories in Harper's, she points out, typically "emphasize the abilities of characters to find contentment through the hardships they encounter by transforming social problems as literary issues into a celebration of the moralistic principles of toleration, acquiescence, and impoverished nobility." The "common stance" of stories in Putnam's, by contrast, was "against sentimental rhetoric." The narrator in "Bartleby," Post-Lauria suggests, is a satiric caricature of a typical narrator in a Harper's story; see Post-Lauria, "Canonical Text and Context: The Example of Herman Melville's 'Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street,'" *College Literature* 20 (June 1993): 196–205.
20. See Dan McCall, *The Silence of Bartleby* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989), 61–63, 110–13; and Bruce L. Grenburg, *Some Other World to Find: Quest and Negation in the Works of Herman Melville* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1989), 169–70.
21. Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840–1857* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981), 233; Astor is quoted on 208.
22. *Ibid.*, 233.
23. Arthur D. Howden Smith, *John Jacob Astor: Landlord of New York* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1929), 97.
24. Stephen Zelnick, "Melville's 'Bartleby': History, Ideology, and Literature," *Marxist Perspectives* 2 (winter 1979–80): 75.
25. Eitner, "The Lawyer's Rockaway Trips," 15.
26. Spann, *The New Metropolis*, 208.

- [27.](#) Ibid., 211.
- [28.](#) Ibid., 234.
- [29.](#) Quoted in Smith, *John Jacob Astor*, 90–91.
- [30.](#) Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 336.
- [31.](#) George Evans, quoted in Zahler, *Eastern Workingmen and National Land Policy*, 34; George Lippard, quoted in Zahler, 53.
- [32.](#) *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1859, 396.
- [33.](#) Zahler, *Eastern Workingmen and National Land Policy*, 44.
- [34.](#) Irving Adler, "Equity, Law, and Bartleby," *Science and Society* 51 (winter 1987–1988): 468–74.
- [35.](#) Spann, *The New Metropolis*, 229, 230, 233.
- [36.](#) James C. Wilson, "The Significance of Petra in 'Bartleby,'" *Melville Society Extracts* 57 (February 1984): 10.
- [37.](#) Helen P. Trimpi notes that Mike Walsh's "character and views were undoubtedly known to Melville early, as a resident of New York City and as the brother of a Democratic politician. Gansevoort Melville had been popular as an orator with the Irish in New York and was actively involved in the New York City Democratic efforts in 1844 to sign up Irish voters for the party, even at the risk of illegally naturalizing them by the hundreds. This was at the same time as Walsh was establishing his newspaper and was winning his way in the party, in his attempt to break the barriers of the Tammany hall electoral system for the Irish immigrants." Trimpi also notes that Melville mentioned Walsh in his 1855–1857 journal and argues that Walsh may be the prototype for the skeptical Irish voice heard in the closing scene of *The Confidence-Man*; see Trimpi, *Melville's Confidence Men and American Politics in the 1850s* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1987), 240–41, 238–40.
- [38.](#) Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 194.
- [39.](#) See James H. Kavanagh, "'That Hive of Subtlety': 'Benito Cereno' as Ideological Critique," *Bucknell Review* 28, No. 1 (1984): 127–57.
- [40.](#) Merton Sealts, *Melville's Reading*, rev. ed. (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1988), 38.
- [41.](#) Leon Howard, *Herman Melville: A Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1951), 108–11, 120.
- [42.](#) Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy*, 73.
- [43.](#) Hershel Parker, "Melville and Politics: A Scrutiny of the Political Milieux of Herman Melville's Life and Works," (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1964), 598.
- [44.](#) John Stafford, *The Literary Criticism of "Young America": A Study in the Relationship of Politics and Literature, 1837–1850* (1952; reprint, New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), 22–28.
- [45.](#) Hershel Parker, "Historical Note—II," in Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or the Whale*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and The Newberry Library, 1988), 594.
- [46.](#) Sealts, *Melville's Reading*, 46.
- [47.](#) Parker, "Melville and Politics," 204.
- [48.](#) Ibid., 222.

- [49.](#) Carolyn L. Karcher, *Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1980), 8–11. See also John Stark, "Melville, Lemuel Shaw, and 'Bartleby,'" in *Bartleby the Inscrutable*, ed. Inge, 166–73. Scholars differ over Melville's attitude toward Hawthorne in the early 1850s. Rogin and Karcher assert that Melville's friendship with Hawthorne cooled soon after Hawthorne authored a campaign biography of Franklin Pierce, who supported the 1850 Compromise and, as President, used Federal troops to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law (Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy*, 219; Karcher, 12–13). Harrison Hayford, however, maintains that Melville had strong affection and respect for Hawthorne past the mid-decade (*Melville's "Monody": Really for Hawthorne?* [Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1990]).
- [50.](#) *New York Tribune*, 8 May 1849, 2.
- [51.](#) Alvin P. Harlow, *Old Bowery Days: The Chronicles of a Famous Street* (New York and London: D. Appleton, 1931), 326.
- [52.](#) Moody, *The Astor Place Riot*, 114.
- [53.](#) *Literary World*, 12 May 1849. The *Literary World* was a weekly, so presumably the Duyckincks wrote these words and sent the issue to press before the shootings at Astor Place occurred.
- [54.](#) *New York Herald*, 9 May 1849, 4.
- [55.](#) Alvin Harlow inaccurately asserts that "John Jacob Astor" signed the *Herald* open letter (*Old Bowery Days*, 323–31). The name of John Jacob Astor I could not have appeared, since the old man died in 1848; neither, however, do the names of John Jacob Astor II or William Astor appear. The view that Melville's Young America acquaintances took of the Astor Place riot is suggested by the account of the event offered by Joel C. Headley, the historian who accompanied Melville and the rest on the Monument Mountain hike of 1850. In his *The Great Riots of New York: 1712 to 1873*, Headley referred to the Astor Place demonstrators as "rabble" and "rowdies." He concluded that "when the public peace is broken, it matters not how great or insignificant the cause, it must be preserved; and if the police or military are called out to do it, and are attacked, they must defend themselves, and uphold the laws, or be false to their trust" (1873; reprint, Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 127. The bystanders who were killed, Headley wrote, "fell victim, as they always must if they will hang on the skirts of a mob from curiosity. Men anxious to witness a fight must take the chances to getting hurt" (126). Melville's situation in relation to the literary establishment is tellingly signaled by two reviews appearing in the very issue of the *Tribune* (10 May 1849) in which the Astor Place riot was reported. Headley's *The Adirondack; or, Life in the Woods* received a sympathetic reading, whereas *Mardi* was summarily dismissed: "We have seldom found our reading faculty so near exhaustion or our good nature as critics so severely exercised, as in the attempt to get through this new work by the author of the fascinating 'Typee' and 'Omoo.'" In May 1849, Melville was clearly dependent upon the Young Americans for his continuing reputation.
- [56.](#) Headley, *The Great Riots of New York*, 120.
- [57.](#) *New York Herald*, 10 May 1849, 2.
- [58.](#) *New York Tribune*, supplement, 11 May 1849, 1.
- [59.](#) Moody, *The Astor Place Riot*, 193.
- [60.](#) *Literary World*, 19 May 1849, 438, 437.
- [61.](#) Moody, *The Astor Place Riot*, 229, 219, 224.
- [62.](#) *The Battle-Pieces of Herman Melville*, ed. Hennig Cohen (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1963), 89. My colleague Heyward Ehrlich has pointed out that a letter from Melville to Evert Duyckinck of 16 August 1850 may be read as making an oblique reference to the Astor Place riot. Ostensibly pitying Duyckinck and Mathews for being stuck in the city ("drear regions which are Trans-Taconic to me"), Melville elaborates a fantasy of his two friends getting "a contract to pave Broadway between Clinton Place & Union-Square." (The Young Americans met at Duyckinck's basement at 20 Clinton Place.) Melville teasingly calls upon his friends to "come out from among those Hittites & Hodites [and] give up mortar forever," noting that "mortar was the *precipitate* of the Fall; & with a brickbat, or a cobblestone *boulder*, Cain killed Abel." He then asks, "Do you use brick-bats for paper-weights in the office? Do you & Mathews pitch pavingstones, & play ball that way in the cool of the evening, opposite the Astor-House?" (*The Letters of Herman Melville*, ed. Merrill R. Davis and William H. Gilman [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960], 111–12). Since the missiles thrown by the rioters at Astor Place had consisted of pieces of rubble from a nearby sewer construction project (Harlow, *The Great Riots of New York*, 328), the reference to Duyckinck and Mathews pitching paving stones is provocative. Melville's tone is hard to pinpoint. In part he engages in fond joking and playful punning. But the assertion that Cain murdered Abel with "a brick-bat, or a cobble-stone boulder" may refer indirectly to the overwhelming

force used by the police against the Astor Place rioters and situate the Astor Place killings in the context of primal murder. (In "Bartleby," the lawyer's moralistically self-serving statement that he and his scrivener are both "sons of Adam" may further echo this idea.) The reference to Mathews and Duyckinck getting a "contract" to pave Broadway implies the two *Literary Review* editors' close connection to the municipal authorities. Furthermore, the notion that Mathews and Duyckinck might use brickbats or paper-weights, as well as the image of them tossing paving-stones and playing ball in front of the Astor House, may be read as suggesting the Young Americans' patrician detachment from the consequences of the state violence that, in their role as cultural arbiters, they helped to instigate and then condoned. While Melville had not yet broken with Mathews and Duyckinck in August 1850, his barbed tone and veiled innuendoes may signal the impending split, as well as intimate a causal relation between this split and the events at Astor Place.

[63.](#) Moody, *The Astor Place Riot*, 173.

[64.](#) Washington Irving, referring to Astor as "my friend," noted in the preface to *Astoria* that the millionaire had "expressed a regret that the true nature and extent of his enterprise and its national character and importance had never been understood, and a wish that I would undertake to give an account of it" (*Astoria: or, Anecdotes of an Enterprise beyond the Rocky Mountains*, ed. William Goetzmann, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1961], 1:xiv). *Astoria*, a "striking and immediate success on both sides of the Atlantic" (Goetzmann, ix), went through eleven editions in Irving's lifetime; it was surely current at the time of the Astor Place riot.

[65.](#) For the significance of the fact that Melville's brothers Gansevoort and Allan had both at one point been Masters in Chancery, see Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy*, 196.

[66.](#) Herman Melville, "The Two Temples," in *The Piazza Tales*, ed. Hayford, MacDougall, Tanselle, et al., 313, 315; all subsequent quotations from this sketch are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[67.](#) Beryl Rowland attributes this statement to Putnam; Harrison Hayford, however, opines that it was made by Briggs; see Rowland, "Grace Church and Melville's Story of 'The Two Temples,'" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 8 (1973): 340; Hayford, letter to author.

[68.](#) Rowland, "Grace Church and Melville's Story," 346.

[69.](#) A detail too delicious to omit: Grace Church was built from stone quarried at Sing Sing.

[70.](#) Melville apparently knew what it was to be shamed by improper clothing. According to Howard, during his European trip in 1849–1850 Melville "was acutely self-conscious about his unfashionable green coat, which aroused amusement on board the *Southampton*, attracted attention on the London streets and caused people to stare in church, but which he could not afford to replace" (*Herman Melville*, 144).

[71.](#) See, for example, William B. Dillingham, *Melville's Short Fiction, 1853–1856* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1977), 104–18; Marvin Fisher, *Going Under: Melville's Short Fiction and the American 1850s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1977), 51–61.

[72.](#) Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville, 1819–1891*, rev. ed., vol. 1 (New York: Gordian Press, 1969), 337, 334.

[73.](#) Herman Melville, *Journals*, ed. Howard C. Horsford with Lynn Horth [Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and The Newberry Library, 1989], 22. Eleanor Metcalf's 1948 edition misreads the phrase as "panted hideously" (Herman Melville, *Journal of a Visit to London and the Continent 1849–1850*, ed. Eleanor Melville Metcalf [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1948], 38).