

The Freedom to Starve: Melville, Marx, and the Trans- Atlantic Political Discourse of the Starving Laborer

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*F*or the last several decades Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (1853) has been historically re-contextualized, bringing a great deal of clarity to the remarkably ambiguous tale. Labor strife in 1840s and '50s New York City is clearly essential to understanding Melville's emaciated and principled clerk.¹ In reframing the tale within the labor struggles then current, the unreliability of the narrator – his "inability to see social relations as constituted by relations of economic power" and the power of capitalist ideology to blind him to the suffering of his employees – have offered substantive explanatory power after a century of erroneous readings that privileged aesthetics over content (Foley 88).² While Melville's "Bartleby" has been one of the central texts from the antebellum period to be reinterpreted, the primary concern of the text, Bartleby's death by starvation, continues to be viewed as a "strange mute sit-in," "suicide," as a desire "to starve himself to death," or, per the lawyer, is the result of some "organic ill" within the scrivener (Green 71; Furlani 340; Rogin 197; "Bartleby" 29).³ However, when Bartleby's death is contextualized within 1850s political discourse – where death by starvation is the central critique levied against the free-trade system – Melville's political commentary, as well as his concern for the working poor, comes into sharper focus. In short, Melville, with his career dying and nearing bankruptcy, puts before his elite readership – who "requirest

a little lower layer” – the central social horror that they simply refused to accept or acknowledge: “the noble Poor” who are “literally starving, [after] laboring industriously from twelve to fifteen hours per day” (*Moby-Dick* 163; “Poor Man” 294; *NYT* “Topics” 4).

Engaging a New Historicist approach, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” is situated within the political and economic discourses of the 1850s where chronic hunger and starvation plagued the free laborer. To this end, the newspapers of the 1850s document countless free laborers that died of starvation. In fact, Karl Marx, while working for Horace Greeley’s *New-York Tribune* catalogued victims of “social murder,” or death by starvation, in the city’s newspapers at the same time Melville was gathering materials for his tale (Engels 70). Indeed, death by starvation was the central and most damning critique levied against the northern economic system. Free-trade capitalism during the 1850s was being assaulted on five major fronts: pro-slavery advocates in the South; northern reformers like Horace Greeley; the formation of early trade unions in the North; emigrants, particularly the Forty-eighters; and labor activists in Europe, like Marx and Engels, whose radical pro-labor views became far more prominent in American newspapers in the aftermath of the 1848 revolutions that had roiled Europe. In all of these discourses the starving laborer figures prominently. In fact, death by starvation was expressed everywhere except within the discourse of free labor itself, where it is conspicuously absent. The repression of the discourse of starvation, both in the period and after, allows for the narrator’s version of events to prevail, causing the reader, like the ideologue, to participate in the social injustice of interpreting the “noble poor” as vice ridden, or simply “lunatic” (“Rich Man’s Crumbs” 294; 22). However, if the tale is considered within the context of hunger and starvation then the “strange discoveries [that] hovered round” the narrator and threaten to awaken his social consciousness – where the sight of suffering is so profound that there is a “shock of recognition” and ideological assumptions are shattered – would be shared by the reader (28; “Mosses” 249). To this end, Melville constructs a protagonist who is a perfect republican operative. Indeed, Bartleby’s unbending commitment to republican virtues – honesty,

industry, and frugality – do not lead the laborer to wealth, but result in chronic malnutrition and, finally, outright starvation. Bartleby's fidelity to capitalist ideology is also evidenced in his preference not to perform unpaid labor like chattel as well as in his ideologically acculturated refusals of charity. Finally, Melville's complex critique of hunger and the virtuous poor comes sharply into focus with the discovery of Bartleby's savings' bank – the core republican artifact of the period – which signals the scrivener's desire to participate in the capitalist economy as disseminated in 1850s economic and political discourses. However, Bartleby's savings' bank – scraped together through rigorous asceticism – not only causes him to deny the needs of his body, but also results in a "general distorting of *individualities* which turns them into their opposite and confers contradictory attributes upon their attributes" so that the "perfectly honest" Bartleby who "frequently restored sixpences and shillings" to the wealthy lawyer, is by tale's end, viewed as a "gentleman forger" and "a vagrant" (Marx *Economic* 61; 44, 42). "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is an exploration into the dominant political and economic ideologies of the period and the perspectives they shape that interpret poverty as vice in order to legitimate the ruthless social divisions that define the antebellum period.

Melville was quick to diagnose the social horror a starving laborer presented because he had seen this before: both in the Liverpool docks as covered in *Redburn* (1849), and the Sandwich Islands as documented in his novel *Typee* (1846). Concerning the Sandwich Islands, Melville writes that "the two classes are receding from each other," "and the common people [...] are fast being destroyed by a complication of disorders, and the want of wholesome food" (188). Melville shifts his critique of European imperialism and hunger from his first novel, *Typee*, to Wall Street where he conducts a searing indictment of free-trade capitalism through his characterization of Bartleby and his fellow scriveners' "want of wholesome food" while they "gobble up scores of these cakes, as [...] they sell them at the rate of six or eight for a penny" (*Typee* 188; 18).

That Melville had his protagonist die by starvation while in the prime of life is no accident. The starving laborer was a topic covered extensively

in the newspapers of the period and, as Barbara Foley observes, Melville visited “the New York Society Library every afternoon to peruse the newspapers (of which he was an avid reader)” (97-98).⁴ In short, the starving laborer was a widely circulated political criticism that Melville seizes and obscures as he turns the “astonished eyes” of the lawyer – who “was not insensible to the late John Jacob Astor’s good opinion” – onto the very subject their ideology could not process: the virtuous, hard-working laborer, who instead of seeing “advancement, improvement in condition,” dies from outright starvation in the city jail (13; Lincoln 179; 14).⁵ Additionally, the fact that neither the narrator nor the readers can decipher the causes of *Bartleby’s* death is central to Melville’s social commentary on the culture of Wall Street and the power of capital to transform “virtue into vice, vice into virtue” allowing the violence encoded into the capitalist ideology to appear just; thus the free-trade ideology and its arranged social order is maintained – in spite of the systemic hunger afflicting the laboring poor where “twenty thousand men and women [are] starving in New-York at this moment,” (Marx *Economic* 61; “Slavery as a Cure” NYT 4).

The most horrific end to a free laborer’s life was to be “driven forth miserably to starve” (23). While it was hard for the merchant classes to realize by “any effort of imagination the protracted horror of death by starvation,” the laborers of the industrial North were made intimate with such an end (“Life” 348). Workingmen and women throughout New York City were, according to a *New-York Times* report from 15 October 1853, “victims [...] of absolute starvation and despair” and their “unfathomed [...] wretchedness [was] concealed by the goodly exterior of [New York] City” (“Outcast” 3). Antebellum pro-labor discourses are rife with the fear of such an end. For the free laborer starvation was the primary means of social control – to compel to labor, to prevent strikes, or like their slave-owning counterparts in the South – to suppress widespread social unrest and “starve them into obedience and submission” (Douglass 196). As Augustine St. Claire states to his sister Ophelia in the wildly popular *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852): “the slave-owner can whip his refractory to death, –

the capitalist can starve him to death" (Stowe 240). Finally, Horace Greeley in *Hints toward Reforms* writes, "The fear of starvation is an inducement to labor only less degrading than the dread of the lash" (273).

The economic discourse of the period sought to efface the starving laborer from the northern imagination in two ways: through claims of shared prosperity, and, by viewing poverty as a result of some "organic ill" within the laborers themselves (29). For example, Henry Carey, author of *The Harmony of Interests* (1851) and eventual chief economic advisor to President Lincoln, argued that "there is a perfect harmony of interests throughout the Union, and among all its people" (42). Where claims of shared prosperity faltered, free-trade ideology simply posited the flaw of poverty within the individuals themselves. As the *New York Times* report from 15 October 1853, titled "The Outcast Poor," states: "in our free and plentiful land the alternative of want or crime is presented to none, except through their voluntary rejection of the paths of industry and virtue" ("Outcast" NYT 3). While capitalist ideology sought to posit the fault of poverty within the poor themselves, Melville's short fiction asserts such entrenched beliefs, instead, cause the "native American poor [...] to suffer more in *mind* than the poor of any other people in the world" ("Poor Man's" 296).

While the northern elite asserted platitudes of a shared prosperity, for those who visited the working-class boroughs of New York City the widespread suffering was readily observable. In a series run in the *New-York Times* during the 1850s titled "Walks among the New-York Poor," readers were given access to a level of poverty often associated with Europe and Britain, but quite present in the free labor North.⁶ In a 23 June 1853 article, the reporter observes, "The whole was very depressing. It seemed like the worst part of old Europe transplanted. There was not even intelligence about their sensuality. You felt hopeless of ever reforming such natures" ("Walks" 2). A similar sentiment was expressed in the 22 November 1853 issue of the *New-York Times*: "Thirty years ago a person would have been laughed at who had said that New-York would soon be a missionary ground. No one would have believed that a London St. Giles

would ever have realized here” (“Poor” 3). Melville’s short fiction of the 1850s indicates “the misery and infamy which is, ever has been, and always will be, precisely the same in India, England, and America” (“Poor Man” 296).⁷

As northern reformers identified the issue of penury and hunger haunting the free-laborer, slavery apologists seized the issue as well. Within the debate between northern capital and southern slavery accusations of pauperism and associative starvation were repeatedly hurled as “the great body of free laborers are starving” (Fitzhugh *Cannibals* 297).⁸ George Fitzhugh, one of the most widely read slavery apologists from the period, writes: “In fact, the ordinary wages of common labor are insufficient [...] and association or *starvation* is in many cases inevitable. In free society, as well in Europe as in America, this is the accepted theory, and various schemes have been resorted to, all without success, to cure the evil” (Fitzhugh *Sociology* 28).

Critiques of free-trade capitalism were not limited to slavery apologists; newspaper giant Horace Greeley espoused similar views. In *Hints toward Reforms* (1850), a book Melville owned, Greeley, frustrated by the plight of the laboring classes in the free-labor North being overshadowed by the issue of slavery, rationalizes his dilemma:

If I am less troubled concerning the Slavery prevalent in Charleston and New-Orleans, it is because I see so much Slavery in New-York, which appears to claim my first efforts. [...] [I would not] undertake to say that the Slavery of the South is not more hideous in kind and degree than that which prevails at the North. [...] But how can I devote myself to a crusade against distant servitude, when I discern its essence pervading my immediate community and neighborhood? (352)⁹

For Greeley, “surplus laborers, vainly seeking employment and underbidding each other in the eager strife, can hardly sustain life on the scanty reward of their exertions” so that “Many perish every year [...] of diseases induced by hunger, want and exposure” (360).

Meanwhile, German immigrants, particularly the Forty-eighters, who found exile in mid-century New York, were highly politicized with an active press.¹⁰ And with them they, too, brought a point of view grounded in the revolutions of 1848 and the counter-revolutions that followed, which was profoundly antagonistic toward mainstream American thought. "It must not be forgotten" wrote the Reverend Urbanek in 1852, that "rotten elements have stolen into this country in large numbers since 1848 with the crowd of troublesome fugitives, and caused annoyance to church and state, for to certain people even Washington is a despot" (qtd Hawgood 230). The Forty-eighters' political perspective, ridiculed by Urbanek, is echoed in Melville's private letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne prospectively dated 1 June 1851: "It is but nature to be shy of a mortal who boldly declares that a thief in jail is as honorable a personage as Gen. George Washington. This is ludicrous. But Truth is the silliest thing under the sun. Try to get a living by the Truth – and go to the Soup Societies" (*Correspondence* 191).¹¹ As a host of critics sought to disrupt northern economic rhetoric, there was no more damning evidence against the free trade system than a "strong-framed man, in the prime of life," dying of "starvation [...] in the midst of prosperity" (Marx "Case of Starvation" 112). Marx reported this episode in Greeley's *New-York Tribune* in the very months Melville was conceiving his tale.

On 25 October 1851 the *New-York Tribune* – the most influential newspaper in mid-nineteenth-century America – published the first of hundreds of articles by Karl Marx. In fact, "the occasion was too noteworthy to be passed over without comment by the paper itself" (Hale 20). In an editorial in that day's paper Marx was introduced to the readership as "one of the clearest and most vigorous writers [Germany] has produced – no matter what may be the judgment of the critical upon his public opinions in the sphere of political and social philosophy" (qtd Hale 20). Marx covered in great detail financial issues, labor strife, the Revolutions of 1848 in Europe, and finally, laborers who were victims of starvation – a subject that interested Melville considerably.¹²

In fact, in the months leading up to the publication of “Bartleby,” Marx had written so much for the *Tribune* that in a letter dated 14 December 1853 he wrote that “Marx/Engels have virtually constituted the EDITORIAL STAFF of the *Tribune*” (“Marx to Engels” 404).¹³ “The sheer volume of the work,” according to Francis Wheen, “is remarkable: the *Tribune* articles together take up nearly seven volumes of the fifty-volume collected works of Marx and Engels [...] more than any published work by Marx, alive or posthumously” (xviii). Avid readers of the *Tribune* during the 1850s were exposed to hundreds upon hundreds of pages of Marx’s insights and critiques of the workings of capital.¹⁴ In fact, Marx’s extensive work at the *Tribune* had a far greater impact on antebellum writers than previously granted.¹⁵

Meanwhile, Marx’s work in the *Tribune* also drew on the issue of the starving laborer to disrupt claims of universal prosperity. Marx’s “Case of Starvation” was published in the *New-York Tribune* on 2 February 1853, the *Semi-Weekly Tribune* on 4 February, and the *New-York Weekly Tribune* on 5 February 1853. In the article, Marx seeks to bring attention to the gross inequities and horrific social consequences confronting laborers within the industrialized economy post-1848 as he details for American readers a worker who was “driven forth miserably to starve” in England (23). Marx detailed how the emaciated laborer was forced daily from barns and sheds and was left “to lie without food for seven days more” (Marx “Case” 112). Marx draws specific connections for his readers between the rights of property and the plight of the operative as well as the disturbing dichotomy between a prosperous society and a starving laborer:

It is hardly possible to conceive a more horrible case. A stalwart, strong-framed man, in the prime of life [...] – his wretched appeals for help to the ‘civilization’ around him – his seven days fast – his brutal abandonment by his fellow men – his seeking shelter and being *driven from resting-place to resting-place* – the [...] miserable death of the worn-out man are a picture perfectly astonishing to contemplate. No doubt he invaded the rights of property,

when he sought shelter [...] in the lone barn!!! (Marx
"Case" 112, italics added)

Marx concludes his entry with an observation that seems almost a blueprint for Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener": "Relate this starvation case in the midst of prosperity, to a fat London City man, and he will answer you with the words of *The London Economist* of Jan. 8th: 'Delightful is it thus to see, under Free Trade, all classes flourishing; their energies are called forth by hope of reward; all improve their productions, and all and each are benefited'" ("Case" 112). Bartleby, "copying by sun-light and by candle-light," somehow did not (19).

We cannot determine with certitude if Melville read this specific article of Marx's, but we can determine that a correct reading of Melville's most famous tale echoes and substantiates the very critique outlined by Marx. The "poor scrivener" "invaded the rights of property" by "making his home" in the lawyer's office, and then the "perfectly honest man" was driven from the office, to the banister, and finally, to his death (42; Marx 112, 27, 42). Further, the disturbing dichotomy of a portly banker whose overly optimistic and pro-capitalistic rhetoric effaces an overworked laborer who dies of starvation provides a window into Bartleby's excruciating death in the midst of Wall Street – a case that is rarely discussed (Marx "Case" 112).¹⁶ Indeed, Melville's tale, when situated in the labor discourse erroneously assumed to have been exclusive to Europe, radiates with its intended meanings and ironies intact. According to Engels in his magnum opus *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (1845), social murder or death by starvation was the too common end of many laborers who worked excruciatingly long hours in the British factories. Engels elucidates nineteenth-century continental strife:

if the bourgeoisie does him the favour to enrich itself by means of him, *wages await him which scarcely suffice to keep body and soul together*; if he can get no work he may steal, if he is not afraid of the police, or *starve*, in which case the *police will take care that he does so in a quiet*

and inoffensive manner. [...] the bourgeoisie, from which the jury is selected, always finds some backdoor through which to escape the frightful verdict, *death from starvation*. The bourgeoisie dare not speak the truth in these cases, for it would speak its own condemnation. (70, italics added)

This fate, where police make sure starving laborers died “in a quiet and inoffensive manner,” was not unique to England. As in “Bartleby,” New York City had become, according to The Prison Association, “a reservoir for the scum of the cast-off population of Europe, [that] crowds our prisons with vagrants and our almshouses with paupers, many of whom *prefer the comforts and leisure* of even our criminal establishments to that ceaseless unrequited toil of liberty” (qtd Spann 76, italics added). Meanwhile, the lawyer “dare[s] not speak the truth” for from his “standpoint [he] cannot even see the facts, much less perceive their consequences,” or if he did “he would speak [to his] own condemnation” (Engels 70, 271, 70). And the police assist the narrator so that his principled clerk dies “in a quiet and inoffensive manner.” Engels asks, “The English working-men call this ‘social murder,’ and accuse our whole society of perpetrating this crime perpetually. Are they wrong?” (70). Therein lies the warp of the narrative as Melville has turned the gaze of the American capitalist onto the very subject their ideology could not explain: the honest, hard-working laborer – who instead of seeing advancement – wastes away.

Melville, in constructing his notoriously inscrutable protagonist, left no doubts that Bartleby was a virtuous republican. “And the moral qualities which would ensure success in one’s calling – honesty, frugality, diligence, punctuality, and sobriety – became religious obligations” that Melville’s character followed scrupulously to the bitter end (Foner 13). For example, the narrator had an “unbounded confidence in [Bartleby’s] common honesty” as he was free “from all dissipation,” and his “incessant industry” made him “a valuable acquisition” (25).¹⁷ Further, Bartleby “was *always there*; – first in the morning, continually through the day, and the last at night” (26). Regarding the virtue of sobriety, Bartleby “never drank

beer like Turkey, or tea and coffee even, like other men" – all republican virtues which were meant to ensure the way to wealth (28). And finally deep within Bartleby's desk rested the core republican artifact: a savings' bank. The willingness to "sacrifice unceasingly at the altar" of mercantilist virtues, left Bartleby "like the last column of some ruined temple" (Lincoln 12, 33). Bartleby's savings are not the behaviors of a suicidal man, but instead suggest his willingness to follow the tenets of capitalist ideology and its promises that "even the poorest and humblest in the land, may, by industry and application, attain a position which will entitle him to the respect and confidence of his fellow men" (qtd Foner 16).

Indeed, "ante-bellum Republicans [...] viewed social mobility as the glory of northern society" (Foner 16). However, Melville dramatizes a very different reality where the lawyer preys on cheap labor: immigrants and children. "Turkey was a short, puffy Englishman," and "Nippers, like his compatriot Turkey," are both immigrants with no hope for future improvement. For example, Nippers, a twenty-five-year-old who worked as a scrivener, "a ward-politician," and "occasionally did a little business at the Justices' courts," was, in spite of all these efforts, visited by "a dun, and the alleged title-deed, a bill" (17, 16, 17). Meanwhile, Turkey, a sixty-five-year-old man nearing the end of his working career, was a "man with so small an income, [he] could not afford to sport such a lustrous face and a lustrous coat at one and the same time" (27, 17). Ginger Nut's father, too, was "ambitious of seeing his son on the bench instead of a cart," but his sacrifices all go unrewarded as Ginger Nut "had a little desk to himself, but he did not use it much," as his primary duties were "errand boy, and cleaner and sweeper" (18). The plight of the scriveners subverts the political rhetoric that claimed the free laborer was not "fatally fixed in that condition for life" (Lincoln 581).¹⁸ Bartleby, meanwhile is "a sort of innocent and transformed Marius brooding among the ruins of Carthage!," suggesting a social stasis unparalleled even in ancient Rome (27-8).¹⁹

The northern élites' response was not to address the growing unrest of laborers, but the glorification of their standing and the empty promise of class mobility. "Our paupers to-day, thanks to free labor, are our

yeoman and merchants of tomorrow” (qtd Foner 16). However, for the lower classes, many critics asserted, there wasn’t any hope of advancement – “not one in a hundred,” as South Carolina’s Chancellor Harper said, “could hope to improve his condition” (qtd Foner 66). In spite of these criticisms, or because of them, northern politicians spoke of “a dynamic expanding capitalistic society, whose achievements and destiny were almost wholly the result of the dignity and opportunities that it offered the average laboring man” (Foner 11). Melville sought to expose such conceits for their hypocrisy – and the character of Bartleby was his means. Through his characterization of Bartleby, Melville seeks to expose the double binds fundamental to free trade ideology: work harder as vitality, strength, and health are exhausted by long hours with little pay; be honest while robbed of fair wages; stifle all discontent as any complaint results in being “violently dismissed”; save more in the face of hunger and dwindling wages; and, finally, as hunger and death approach refuse all charity (21).²⁰

Much is made of the narrator’s charity. Thomas Dilworth, in his “Narrator of ‘Bartleby’: The Christian-Humanist Acquaintance of John Jacob Astor,” asks: “What more can the lawyer do or offer to do? Among critics of the story, the practical moralists contend that if he were more virtuous, he could help Bartleby, yet no critic has been able to suggest a specific form such help might take” (52). Bartleby, like any virtuous citizen, does not want “help,” he wants to perform, as his savings’ bank suggests, paid labor so he can be beyond the lawyer’s “Pharisaic philanthropy” where he “give[s] back to the plundered victim the hundredth part of what belongs to [him]!” (Engels 279).

It must be remembered that Bartleby gets paid “at the usual rate of four cents a folio” (25). He does not get paid for proofing – reading carefully over every word – “a law document of, say five hundred pages, closely written in a crimped hand” (20). He does not get paid to “just step around to the Post Office,” or “to put his finger, say, on the incipient tie of a bit of red tape with which [the lawyer] was about compressing some papers” (25, 26). And he receives no compensation for “fetch[ing] some

papers," or for serving the narrator's commands "in case any trifling thing was to be done" (37, 19). Bartleby – caught in this ideological double bind of working long hours with little pay to fuel his dreams of advancement – resisted being repeatedly "dispatched on the most trivial errand" without pay while he was running "a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light" (19, 25, 19). Bartleby, like Tocqueville, sees "the notion of labor as a source of profit," and so after his first refusal to perform an unpaid task Bartleby simply "went on with his own writing," as the capitalist enterprise demands (*Democracy* 161, 21). Free labor proponents argued that "labor is not in vain," and accordingly, it is around this republican horror – to work without pay like chattel – that Bartleby first utters his confounding, "I prefer not to" (Myrtle 2, 20).²¹

Bartleby's refusal to read over hundreds of pages of copy without pay affected his coworkers as well. The lawyer, requiring Turkey and Nippers to continue with the dead work, or unpaid tasks, writes, "Turkey deferentially dropped his opinion that this proceeding was quite out of the common" (22). Nippers, barely able to suppress his fury as the workplace dynamics require, "ground out between his set teeth," that "this was the first and the last time he would do another man's business without pay" (22-23). Meanwhile, Bartleby's "incessant industry" continued, but it was not enough for the narrator (25). The lawyer concludes: "I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically" (19-20).²²

Following the tenets of capitalist ideology, copying by day and by night, while denying the needs of the body, rendered Bartleby like so many antebellum laborers sickly, unable to work, and dependent on charity. As countless laborers earned wages "which scarcely suffice to keep body and soul together," they were simultaneously conditioned to refuse "grudged charity," leaving the virtuous laborer "absolutely alone in the universe" (Engels 70; Greeley 323, 32).²³ The narrator's sanctimonious charity is offensive to the principled clerk because encoded into the ideology is the shame of charity, and hence, Bartleby's repeated refusals here, too.²⁴ Melville addresses this issue directly in his "Poor Man's Pudding" (1854).

The narrator, who visits the Coulters' shanty, in spite of their extreme poverty offered nothing in return for their hospitality because he "knew that such offerings would have been more than declined; charity resented" (296).

While the poor were expected to deny charity, the wealthy used charity as "Mere self-interest," or as "a sweet morsel for [their] conscience" (36, 24). The lawyer, while he imagines Bartleby to be penniless, even offers to take Bartleby "home not to [his] office, but [his] dwelling," but Bartleby refuses as the countless laborers who adhered to "those peculiar social sensibilities nourished by our own peculiar political principles [...] do but minister to the added wretchedness of the unfortunate [...] by prohibiting their acceptance of what little random relief charity may offer" (41; "Poor Man" 296). Meanwhile, a "man with so small an income," practicing parsimony, while denying charity as the ideology demands, cannot be sustained. Bartleby, "long famishing for something to copy," only quits copying near tale's end after the narrator has discovered his savings and noticed that his eyes looked "dull and glazed" (19, 32). Engels observes, "Touching these workers [...] the long working-hours, imposed by low wages, with a sedentary life and the strain upon the eyes involved in the nature of the employment, usually enfeeble the whole frame, and especially the eyes" (*Condition* 189). Once the scrivener's eyesight begins to fail and he is unable to work, Engels concludes, "he simply starves" (73).

Melville's critique of capitalist ideology through the starving laborer, and the ideologue's inability to recognize such violence, is expanded through the depiction of Bartleby's savings' bank. To stave off starvation the frugal and industrious worker must, ironically, save more and eat less. The idea of the miser in the political economy of Jean-Baptiste Say and Adam Smith demands a renunciation of pleasures for the sake of future wealth. "This science of marvellous industry," Marx observes, "is simultaneously the science of asceticism, and its true ideal is the ascetic but extortionate miser and the ascetic but productive slave. Its moral ideal is the worker who takes part of his wages to the savings-bank, [which] has

been presented, bathed in sentimentality, on the stage" (*Economic* 51). Melville's savings bank, however, is bathed not in sentimentalism, but misperception, discord, and death.

Where Paul Rogin, in his *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (1986), asserts that the lawyer invoked "Christ's injunction that 'ye love one another' to stop himself from doing violence to Bartleby," and the lawyer "cites 'self-interest' as a motive for 'charity,'" this reading functions through only part of the text as the lawyer's benevolent frame of mind is routed once he discovers Bartleby's savings' bank (13, 29). The lawyer, citing the rights of property, rifles through Bartleby's desk where to his consternation, he discovers "an old bandanna handkerchief, heavy and knotted. [...] it was a savings' bank" (28). The savings' bank causes a profound shift in the lawyer's perspective where Bartleby is transformed from a "lean, penniless wight," with "No visible means of support," into someone who "indubitably [...] does support himself" (25, 38). The lawyer observes, "A great change was wrought in me" (38). The narrator no longer imagines "a sweet morsel for [his] conscience," but instead begins to contemplate letting Bartleby "live and die here, and then mason up his remains in the wall" (38). The lawyer's "overpowering stinging melancholy," upon discovering Bartleby's savings – due to "a prudential feeling" – turns his "pity into repulsion" (29). This "prudential feeling" literally rendered the lawyer unfit for "going to Trinity Church that morning" as Melville's critique of capitalist ideology co-opting religious belief is more fully realized (29).²⁵ The scriveners, while in a state of abject poverty, allow the lawyer to "lay up in [his] soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for [his] conscience," through ersatz charity, but in possessing money Bartleby becomes an adversary.

Referencing the fundamental violence encoded into the capitalist ideology, the lawyer states, "Either you must do something, or something must be done to you" (41). No longer imagining charity as a solution, he shifts to bribes, perpetual occupancy, and thoughts of murder. Melville writes: "the idea came upon [the lawyer] of [Bartleby] possibly turning out

a long-lived man,” due to Bartleby’s ability to keep “soul and body together to the last upon his savings (for doubtless he spent but half a dime a day)” (38). The lawyer complains that Bartleby would “claim possession [of the] office by right of his perpetual occupancy” (38). The apparently good-natured lawyer, who began the tale with a “fellow-feeling [that] was hardly to be resisted” due to his love of money, begins contemplating murder. The lawyer’s reaction to Bartleby’s savings is stunning in its vitriol and represents a major shift in the narrative. Bartleby’s savings not only expedites his physical demise, but also brings him into direct conflict with the narrator, where the lawyer’s love of “bullion” results in his Christian sympathies being fully drowned “in the icy water of egotistical calculation,” and the social murder of his best employee (13; Marx *Manifesto* 222). Money, for Melville, “foments discord” and misperception as it is “the universal confounding and distorting of things” by making “black white, foul fair, Wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant” (*Typee* 126; Marx *Economic* 61; Shakespeare *Timon* 416). The sympathies of the reader are at this point confused as to who is virtuous, who is pious – in short, who is sympathetic.

Melville’s critique of capitalist ideology is further developed through the confounding power of money. In fact, contrary attributes are bestowed upon the other as after Bartleby’s money is found the scrivener possesses agency, for a time. To this end, Bartleby “turned the tongues, if not the heads of myself and clerks,” the narrator “lived in [his] rockaway for the time,” and even “will change [his] offices [and] move elsewhere” (31, 42, 39). And while the confounding power of money turns perceptions of the narrator from “foul [to] fair,” the perceptions around Bartleby shift from “a perfectly honest man” to “a little deranged” (42; 44). In short, Bartleby is an ideal drawn from free-labor capitalist discourse interpreted as odd for his unbending commitment to capitalist virtues.

Meanwhile, the scrivener’s commitment to capitalist virtues required a level of sacrifice beyond the power of the living. Bartleby, working day and night “by his dim window,” and surviving “entirely on ginger-nuts,” had denied his body for future wealth for too long (32, 23). Bartleby’s

denials, while seeming extreme, were by no means unprecedented. Benjamin Franklin, years earlier, had recommended "a vegetable diet" as he "could save half what he [was] paid" (18). In his *Autobiography*, Franklin claimed he dined on "light repast[s], which often was no more than a bisket or a slice of bread [...] and a glass of water" as a way to wealth (18-19). Melville explicitly mocks Franklin, his utilitarian philosophy, and its effects on the laboring poor in *Israel Potter*, a serialized novel published in *Putnam's* between July 1854 and March 1855. Potter, living in poverty, was "elbowed out of many a chance three penny job by the added thousands who contended with him against starvation" as the end of the Revolutionary War "filled England, and more especially London, with hordes of disbanded soldiers; thousands of whom, rather than starve [...] would work for such a pittance as to bring down the wages of all the laboring classes" (264). In a subsequent scene, Franklin advises Potter that "it is bad policy" when "a poor man dines out at his own charge" (74). He further advises Potter to "avoid wine as a costly luxury," and, instead, to drink water as "Plain water is a very good drink for plain men" (76, 74). Meanwhile, Potter reads from a pamphlet of Franklin's and becomes so frustrated that he "slam[s] down the pamphlet" and declares, "It's wisdom that's cheap, and it's fortune that's dear. That ain't in Poor Richard; but it ought to be" (91). Concerning how the characterization of Franklin functions within *Israel Potter*, Alexander Keyssar notes that "the worker's life, devoid of pleasure, or prosperity, can only lead to a denial of all hope and, indeed, a denial of the value of individual life itself" (33-34). Meanwhile, Franklin's autobiography, written with the express intent "to promote a greater spirit of industry and early attention to business, frugality, and temperance with the American youth," led Bartleby, not "to a state of affluence," but "to the Tombs as a vagrant" (Franklin 72-73, 6, 42). Engels observes: "Who guarantees that [...] uprightness, industry, thrift, and the rest of the virtues recommended by the bourgeoisie, are really his road to happiness?" (*Condition* 26-27). For Melville, practicing these virtues led the working class to penury, chronic hunger, and outright starvation.

The need to save money “with so small an income” left Bartleby, who “never eats a dinner,” exhibiting the symptoms associated with severe and chronic malnutrition – a dilemma confronted by literally thousands of free laborers (17, 23). In a medical description of the effects of starvation, the parallels in Melville’s tale are obvious and stunning. Engels observes: “In the least unfavourable case, aggravated near-sightedness follows; in the worst case, which is frequent enough, incurable *blindness* from decay of vision” results (206, italics added). Speaking to the plight of seamstresses in particular, Engels provides a description that mirrors the symptoms unwittingly described by the lawyer: “They usually die of consumption after suffering the severest forms of digestive disorders [...] Enervation, exhaustion, debility, loss of appetite, pains in the shoulders, back, and hips, [...] leanness, swelled, weeping, and smarting eyes, which soon become shortsighted [...]. In many cases the eyes suffer so severely that incurable blindness follows” (220). Dr. Bisset Hawkins offered a medical analysis: “On all sides it is admitted that indigestion, hypochondriasis and languor affect this class of the population very widely” (qtd Engels 179). Bartleby’s lethargy, his “dull and glazed” eyes, his “lean visage,” his “thin and pale” frame, his “long-continued motionlessness,” his “Dead-wall reveries” are all the symptoms and behaviors of a starving man (29, 26, 28, 29, 32).²⁶ Moreover, Nippers’ “severer indigestion than common,” his “sallow” complexion, and the “sore aching in his back,” suggests his fate, too, is near at hand (30, 16, 17).

It was at this late point in the tale that Bartleby, his eyes “dull and glazed,” finally gives up writing (32). The lawyer, seeing Bartleby had worked himself to blindness, states that he “was touched” (32). Bartleby, now unable to work and homeless, was left “sitting upon the banisters of the stairs by day, and sleeping in the entry by night” (40). Engels observes that when “misery reaches its height, and then the brutality with which society abandons its members, just when their need is greatest, comes out fully into the light of day” (Engels 74). The narrator simply abandons Bartleby “dodging every one by the suddenness and rapidity of [his] flight [as he] rushed from the building,” and after “surrendering [his] business

to Nippers, for a few days," simply waited out the inevitable death of his best employee (41-42). "All is over with him, by this time, thought [the lawyer] at last, when through another week no further intelligence reached [him]" (40). Upon returning to his office the lawyer learned that the landlord "had sent to the police, and had Bartleby removed to the Tombs as a vagrant" (42). Bartleby's fate was now sealed.

Bartleby is visited one last time by the narrator. The lawyer, ever aware of Bartleby's intense commitment to virtue even through the throes of starvation, states: "Nothing reproachful attaches to you here" (43). Bartleby, cognizant until the end, replies: "I know where I am" (43). With misperceptions around wealth and money, by tale's end "the wasted Bartleby" was left surrounded by "murderers and thieves," and indistinguishable from a "pale and genteel-like" forger (44). The virtuous Bartleby cannot even be distinguished from Monroe Edwards – a reputed slave smuggler and notorious conman.²⁷ Meanwhile, the narrator, who has worked his best employee to death and who began the tale as "one of those unambitious lawyers" counting "upon a life-lease of the profits" of the notoriously corrupt Master of Chancery, is perceived as a charitable and concerned Christian due to the fact he "slipp[ed] some silver into the grub-man's hands" much like the payment Judas received for betraying Christ (14).²⁸ The "divine power of money in distorting and confounding of all human and natural qualities" has transmuted the Christian lawyer into a hypocrite and the "honest scrivener" into a common criminal (24, 29). Indeed, money "Will knit and break religions, bless the accursed,/ [...] place thieves/ And give them title, knee and approbation" (Shakespeare, *Timon* 4.3.35-37). Where the lawyer loses his religion over prudential concerns, Bartleby loses his life. Hence the lawyer's "Ah Bartleby! Ah Humanity!" (45). Finally, the transformative power of money has occluded the scrivener's true cause of death.

In the sequel to the tale the lawyer passes on "one little item of rumor," and Melville provides the final key for reading and interpreting his masterpiece of short fiction – "Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?" (45). Newspaper articles use the term hundreds of times usually

when discussing an ineffectual law. Similarly, Marx and Engels repeatedly refer to labor reform laws which have no effect as “dead letter[s]” (189, 255).²⁹ Speaking to labor-reform laws addressing child labor and “the enforcement of the Factory Act,” Engels in his *Condition* writes: “Many employers disregard the law, *shorten the meal times*, work children longer than is permitted, and risk prosecution, knowing that the possible fines are trifling in comparison with the *certain profits* derivable from the offence. Just at present especially, while business is *exceptionally brisk*, they are under great temptation in this respect” (189, italics added). In spite of these laws children were required to work “fourteen to sixteen hours, or even longer,” their lunch hours were shortened or eliminated altogether (189). Engels observes: “The fact is, that prior to the Act of 1833, young persons and children were worked all night, all day, or both *ad libitum*.” The interests of capital had consolidated so much power that even the labor reform laws acted as nothing more than “dead letters” (Engels *Condition* 255). Further, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, speaking to the usage of the term in *Romans* and *Corinthians* states, “A writing, etc. taken in a bare literal sense without reference to its ‘spirit’, and hence useless or ineffective (cf. Rom. vii. 6, 2 Cor. iii. 6).”³⁰ Melville’s sequel is a warning against literalist reading habits, against viewing the world as the dominant ideology demands. “Bartleby, the Scrivener” is a blueprint, a dramatization, of the distortive nature of ideology and its attendant assumptions around wealth and poverty. Taking the narrator’s version of events “in a bare literal sense,” leaves the reader imagining Bartleby has died as a result of his own belligerent will, when, in fact, Bartleby is a perfect free laborer where the tenets of capitalism betray him. To this end, if the tale is interpreted through its “spirit” – where the historical allusions and the encoded rhetoric that directs the reader to contradictory economic and political discourses – then social justice becomes possible.

Indeed, the central horror confronting a free laborer occurs right before the lawyer’s “astonished eyes” (13). Bartleby’s starvation in the midst of Wall Street is a death “perfectly astonishing to contemplate,” but the American lawyer, like the “fat London City man” covered by Marx in the

Tribune, cannot see beyond his own ideological perspective. Unable to decipher a virtuous man's fall, his best employee, who began the tale "On errands of life" is, with the narrator's version of his history, "spe[d] to death" and misunderstanding; ultimately enabling the free-trade ideology to continue its violence over the American laborer (13, 45). While the economic and political discourses effectively elided the issue of the starving laborer, *Bartleby's* fate, however, was not uncommon. In fact, in 1847, the Prison Association of New York complained that the prisons were "places of death where some ten to twelve persons died each day" (Spann 71). Engels states, "The English call this social murder, [...] Are they wrong?" Melville presents a similar tale before his northern audience, and more than a century and a half later, America is still trying to determine the scrivener's cause of death. *Bartleby's* death by starvation was far more common than the capitalist ideology allows, and the distortive power of money, for Melville and Marx, is central to the delusion.

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Notes

¹ See Barbara Foley's "From Wall Street to Astor Place: Historicizing Melville's 'Bartleby,'" *American Literature*, Vol. 72, No.1 (2000), 87-116, where she argues "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.'" Also see David Kuebrich's "Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in 'Bartleby,'" *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 3. (September 1996), 381-405. See Ralph James Savarese's "Nervous Wrecks and Ginger-Nuts: *Bartleby* at a Standstill," *Leviathan*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (October 2003), 19-49.

² The enigmatic nature of *Bartleby* increased due to some of the scholarship practiced during the Cold War. Some New Critics, led by F.O. Matthiessen, canonized the major authors – divorced of their historical and

material significance – privileging instead the ambiguities and ironies at work within the text. David Shumway argues that Matthiessens's *American Renaissance* “represents not merely the death knell for historical scholarship in American literature, but for history itself” as the works of Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne were “not connected to any social, political, or economic system – or indeed, even to particular institutions or communities” (260, 241).

³ 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 University Press and The Newberry Library, 1987). Subsequent quotations from “Bartleby” are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴ A host of scholars assert Melville's familiarity with contemporary newspapers. Merton Sealts “reports that the Melville household subscribed to the *New-York Herald* and that Melville also sometimes read Greeley's *Tribune*” (qtd Keubrich 383-84). In *Redburn* (1849) Melville writes: “For months previous I had been poring over old New York papers, delightfully perusing the long columns” (3). And again: “I perceived that this was a news-room, full of files of papers. My love of literature prompted me to open the door and step in” (156).

⁵ The narrator's affinity for John Jacob Astor says much about his worldview considering how his death in 1848 was accompanied by “a few sour notes of open criticism” (Spann 234). It 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.’” (qtd Spann 233).

⁶ “Walks Among the New-York Poor,” 11 and 18 October 1852; “Vagrant Boys,” 21 January 1853; “The Rag and Bone Pickers,” 22

January 1853; "The Organ Grinders," 11 February 1853; "The Eleventh Ward," 4 March 1853; "The News-Boys," 12 March 1853; "Rotten Row," 19 April 1853; "Street-Boys," 30 May 1853; "Emigrants and Emigrants' Children," 23 June 1853; "Walks Among the New-York Poor," 5 November 1853; "Christmas," 30 December 1853. The series continues until 19 October 1854. I have included titles up until the publication of "Bartleby."

⁷ Much of Melville's work from the period, 1853-1856, looks to collapse the perceived differences between the plight of the laborer in England, America, and India. It is significant that Marx in the *Tribune* had been writing for years on the conditions in both England and India. Marx, speaking to British colonialism and its economic system reducing the laborers there to absolute poverty, quoted Dr. John Bowring's Speech in the House of Commons delivered on 28 July 1835: "Terrible are the accounts of the wretchedness of the poor Indian weavers, reduced to the verge of starvation. And what was the sole cause? The presence of the cheaper English manufacture. [...] Numbers of them die of hunger. [...] Not to have changed their trade was inevitable starvation" (*MECW* Vol. 6, 450). Further, Greeley in his *Hints toward Reforms*, writes, "That the evil was by no means confined to the weavers, but that the present suffering of 'numerous classes,' (those whom Free Traders say Protection would tax for the benefit of the weaver) 'is scarcely to be paralleled in the history of Commerce'" (235).

⁸ Eric Foner observes that during the 1850s, "the activity of the pro-slavery theorists reached its peak, and in fact the Republican defense of the northern social order and their glorification of free labor were in part a response to the attacks of these same writers, especially George Fitzhugh" (66). It is within this discursive tradition, outlined by Foner, that the writings of George Fitzhugh – a slavery advocate and author of *Sociology for the South* (1854) and *Cannibals All!; or Slaves Without Masters* (1857) emerged. These writings "alarmed northerners like Abraham Lincoln and roused southerners to take new and higher ground in defense of slavery" (Wilson 290).

⁹ In 1850, Melville purchased Greeley's *Hints toward Reforms*, in *Lectures, Addresses, and Other Writings* (New York, 1850). See Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Melville's Reading: A Check-List of Books Owned and Borrowed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 130.

¹⁰ As Saul Padover notes in *Karl Marx: An Intimate Biography* (1978): "Between 1852 and 1854, about one-half million Germans landed in New York, including a good number of Marx's comrades-in-arms from the Revolution of 1848" (303). The *New-York Times* from 3 November 1853 reports that in "1852, of the 300,000 immigrants who landed at this port 118,000 were Germans. It is estimated that 100,000 more landed at other ports of this country" ("German Immigrants" 2).

¹¹ In the German section of New York City a Mr. Lindenmueller – who is described in the news reports as a man of modest wealth – was addressing the social evil that had plagued Melville's literary specter and stalked laborers throughout the City: starvation. Mr. Lindenmueller, according to the *New-York Times* for 20 January 1854, invested \$100 of his own money where he converted a bowling alley into a large soup kitchen and "communicated his project to the German papers – where he found the heartiest support – and by their means invited all the poor to his table" ("Free" 3). Lindenmueller had tried this "experiment" because he had been "touched by the continuous sight of utter destitution, poverty, and *starvation*, which meet the eye in this City" (3, italics added). Published a month after *Bartleby's* final installment, Melville, like Lindenmueller, had turned his eye to the central social horror confronting operatives in 1850s New York City.

¹² In "Poor Man's Pudding, Rich Man's Crumbs" (1854) Melville details a heart-rending account of a laborer and his wife who live on the brink of starvation, even losing their two children to illnesses associated with chronic malnutrition, in spite of the husband's continual labors and his pregnant wife's best efforts. In "Cock-a-Doodle-Do" a husband and wife waste away of starvation in bed together leaving four children. Near tale's end Melville writes: "Going behind the curtain, there lay a wasted, but strangely cheerful human

face [...]. At the bedside, sat a pale girl, ministering. In another bed lay three children, side by side: three more pale faces" (285). The wife of the wood-sawyer had "Not the least" hope of recovery and soon thereafter the wood-sawyer, too, dies.

¹³ Greeley's *Tribune* was not the only organ where Marx's political views find expression in 1850s New York City. Joseph Weydemeyer, a Forty-Eighter living in exile in New York City, began publishing *Die Revolution* in 1851. Both Marx and Engels "set great hopes on Weydemeyer's activity in the United States." Marx directed Weydemeyer "that the *Communist Manifesto* be immediately published as a pamphlet in both German and English" (Obermann 35-36). Another Forty-Eighter, Eduard Ignaz Koch, "asked Marx for the *Communist Manifesto*, and a month later twenty copies, together with an English translation from the *Red Republican* [...] were sent to him with the suggestion that the translated version be issued as a pamphlet" (Obermann 35-36). Whether Melville encountered an English translation of the *Manifesto* or more interestingly Engels *Condition* in New York City or during his 1849 trip to Britain (as *Bartleby* seems to echo specific passages from the latter) is purely speculative. Nonetheless these ideas were far more ubiquitous than most criticisms of "Bartleby" allow.

¹⁴ Throughout this period, according to Merton Sealts, Jr. in *Melville's Reading: A Checklist of Books Owned or Borrowed*, "reading of all kinds, including newspapers and magazines, provided Melville with recreation as well as source material" (20). Meanwhile, Marx complained about the omission of his name from the bylines, so many readers would have been reading Marx unaware of who the author actually was. See Michael Perelman's *Political Economy and the Press: Karl Marx and Henry Carey at the New York Tribune*, where Padover writes: "Almost one quarter of his contributions were printed as unsigned editorials" (Perelman 168).

¹⁵ Beyond Melville, the influences of Marx's journalism are readily observable in the work of many of the writers from the period. Ralph Waldo Emerson made a direct reference to Karl Marx in his

journals. Lewis S. Feuer asserts: “He recorded the following passage: *Fate*. ‘The classes and the races too weak to master the new conditions of life must give way.’” Feuer ascribed this citation to Emerson’s journal for 1853, and further observed that Emerson had later used it in his poem “Rex.” The quote was drawn by Emerson from an article by Karl Marx published in the *New York Daily Tribune* of 22 March 1853, and entitled “Forced Emigration.” See Lewis S. Feuer, “Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Reference to Karl Marx,” *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (September 1960), 378-79. Gale Chevigny notes that Margaret Fuller was “arguably the first reporter to introduce Marx to American readers in the context of one of these translations” (Chevigny 294). Marx’s impact on antebellum American literature and thought needs to be reconsidered as writers like Emerson, Fuller, and Melville as well as laborers, First Wave feminists, and slavery advocates had far more access to his views than previously granted. Indeed, in many ways the writers of the young Republic had far more access to Marxist ideas than their European counterparts.

¹⁶ Herschel Parker documented that Melville was known to be reading Greeley’s *Tribune* during this time. On 18 February 1853, a fortnight before Marx’s article was published three times in the first week of February, the same newspaper “contained an advertisement for a new book called *The Lawyer’s Story*.” It began: “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 his intense application to his duties.” Although “we can’t be certain if Melville read this book,” Herschel Parker writes in his exhaustive biography, “the newspaper advertisement and ‘that remarkably evocative sentence went into his file’” (150). Marx’s “Case of Starvation” almost certainly went into Melville’s file as well.

¹⁷ Amidst descriptions of Bartleby’s practice of republican virtues is yet another use of rhetoric that implies ownership of the free laborer. Mike Walsh, the editor of the *Subterranean* who was twice jailed for his radical

views espoused in print, observed: "Demagogues tell you that you are freemen. They lie; you are slaves" (qtd Spann 233).

¹⁸ To better understand Bartleby's commitment to the mercantile tenets of Republicanism, consider for a moment the following description from Owen Chase's *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whaleship Essex* – a text Melville obviously read – when describing a man dying of starvation: "He lay in the greatest pain and apparent misery, groaning piteously until four o'clock, when he died, in the most horrid and frightful convulsions I ever witnessed" (Heffernan 70). Further invoking the plight of distressed sailors and their tales of excruciating hardship occurs when Bartleby is described as a "bit of wreck in the mid Atlantic" (32). Bartleby is not beyond help due to being stranded on the ocean, but ironically to the isolating tendencies of republican ideology and free-trade capitalism.

¹⁹ Gaius Marius "was of humble beginnings" and "did not hold any public office until he was voted to the position of Tribune of the People in 119 BC." Marius enacted land reform laws that allowed the lowest class of Romans to serve in the army and thereby acquire land. Marius also "offered the soldier's job to Rome's poor." Marius was elected seven times, and a power struggle began between him and the aristocratic interests of the Roman senate. A civil war ensued and he was eventually exiled to Carthage. Marius was arrested and "sentenced to death, but no one was willing to execute the old man" ("Illustrated History of Rome"). That Bartleby is an "innocent and transformed" Marius indicates Bartleby was a substantial figure completely stifled by the political and economic ideologies functioning in mid-century America, for Bartleby has no rise before his fall (28).

²⁰ Speaking of his friend Charles Fenno Hoffman, Melville stated, "But he was just the man to go mad – imaginative, voluptuously inclined, poor, unemployed, in the race of life distanced by his inferiors, unmarried, – without a port or haven in the universe to make" (*Correspondence* 128). Bartleby is the superior to the narrator in every way (honest, hard working, respectful), but due to the nature of capital he must endure the lawyer's

tyranny. The day-in and day-out reality results in an existential rage that Bartleby must stifle. “It is instead,” writes Jean-Paul Sartre, “a painful and dangerous labour that is faced in anguish and often pits the boxer against a better-armed opponent: he learns the limits of his power through the sufferings inflicted on him. This conjuring away of violence is a constitutive element of the young man’s new personality” (*Dialectical Reason* 43).

²¹ Bartleby’s being required to perform a number of unpaid tasks is reminiscent of a central theme in slave narratives – of laboring with no hope of reward. Frederick Douglass in his *Narrative* writes: “I could see no reason why I should, at the end of each week, pour the reward of my toil into the purse of my master” (102).

²² This observation of the narrator’s is reminiscent of the scene from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) where the trader Haley warns his slaves with the following: “I hope you keep up good heart, and are cheerful. Now, no sulks, ye see; keep stiff upper lip, boys.” (131).

²³ In fact, Bartleby “never complained of ill health,” while “frequently restor[ing] to [the narrator] sixpences and shillings carelessly dropped upon the floor” (28, 33). Suffering in silence is yet another republican virtue.

²⁴ The isolating tendencies inherent to capitalist ideology are addressed in Adam Smith when he writes that “Nothing is so mortifying as to be obliged to expose our distress to the view of the public” (*Moral Sentiments* 77). And when the shame of poverty did not result in self-silencing, then the police simply arrested and jailed them.

²⁵ In one of Melville’s most celebrated letters prospectively dated 1 June 1851, Melville writes: “With no son of man do I stand upon any etiquette or ceremony, except the Christian ones of charity and honesty” (*Correspondence* 190).

²⁶ Concerning Bartleby’s reveries, see Owen Chase’s *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex* where he writes: “I laid down at night to catch a few moments of oblivious sleep, and immediately my starving fancy was at work. I dreamt of being

placed near a splendid and rich repast [...] and of contemplating the moment in which we were to commence to eat with enraptured feelings of delight; and just as I was about to partake of it, I suddenly awoke to the cold realities of my miserable situation" (112).

²⁷ Monroe Edwards was a notorious, real-life criminal, confidence man, and slave smuggler. See *Life and Adventures of the Accomplished Forger and Swindler Colonel Monroe Edwards* (New York: Long, 1848). For Melville, "a thief in jail is as honorable a personage as Gen. George Washington" (Melville *Correspondence* 191).

²⁸ For an in-depth discussion of the Master of Chancery see Herbert F. Smith's "Melville's Master in Chancery and his Recalcitrant Clerk," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Winter 1965), 734-41, where Smith observes: "The Courts of Chancery in America were closely identified with the royal governors, as their heritage might suggest. But, strangely enough, after the revolution they were retained, sometimes even strengthened for the first few decades of the new nation's life until, in the middle of the nineteenth century, a wave of reform combined chancery pleadings with common law. In 1848 the state of New York did away with the court" (735-36).

²⁹ Frederick Engels writes: "Where does the Bible demand literal belief in its teachings, in its accounts? Where does a single apostle declare that everything he says is directly inspired? This is not surrendering reason in obedience to Christ, as the orthodox people affirm; no, it is a killing of the divine in man to replace it with the dead letter" (To Friedrich Graeber In Berlin [Bremen, about 23 April-1 May 1839]).

³⁰ See, Romans 7:6 where it states: "But now we are released from the law, dead to what held us captive, so that we may serve in the newness of the spirit and not under the obsolete letter." Also consider, 2 Corinthians 3:5-6: "Not that of ourselves we are qualified to take credit for anything as coming from us; rather, our qualification comes from God, who has indeed qualified us as ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter brings death, but the Spirit gives life."

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