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Author(s): David Kuebrich

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Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in "Bartleby"

DAVID KUEBRICH

PRIOR to beginning work on "Bartleby" in early 1853, Herman Melville had not only encountered many of the essential arguments structuring the radical labor tradition but he had also personally tasted the frustration and oppression fueling its inner spirit. Various aspects of Melville's life—his family's economic decline, his futile search for work on the Erie Canal, in Galena, Illinois, and in New York City in the late 1830s, his subsequent decision to become a commercial sailor and whaler, and the quasi-enslavement he experienced at sea—gave him an acute personal sense of the discrepancy between the nation's economic practices and its purported democratic and Christian ideals, an understanding he would soon embody in one of his most baffling tales.

Class Conflict in Melville's New York

In no place was a more potent political activism distilled from such ideological discrepancy than in New York City. In 1850 New York witnessed a broad range of militant working-class political turmoil: mass meetings, parades, rallies, demonstrations, and strikes. Uniting under the banner of the New York Industrial Congress, the movement was sufficiently powerful to win the right to hold its meetings in the supreme court chambers of the new city hall. In July the tailors, the city's largest and most oppressed group of skilled workers, launched what became the "bloodiest and most divisive" strike of the pre-Civil War period. On 4 August some three hundred marching tailors were attacked by police, and in the subsequent melee at least two tailors were

slain (marking the first incident in which U.S. workers were killed by police in a labor dispute), dozens were injured, and forty arrested.¹ Throughout this time, workers continued to insist upon their God-given right to, among other things, land and the full value of their labor. As the Industrial Congress declared in 1851:

all men are created equal . . . they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are the right to Life, Liberty, and the fruits of their Labor, and to the use of such a portion of the earth and other elements as are necessary for their subsistence and comfort.²

The efforts of workers to gain economic and political power, especially the dramatic labor agitation of 1850, were reported extensively in the era's two major city papers: James Gordon Bennett's *Herald* and Horace Greeley's *Tribune*. Bennett and Greeley—prime specimens of the self-made man—both claimed to champion the cause of the working class, but their views were diametrically opposed. In responding to a meeting of journeymen carpenters, some of whom displayed socialist leanings, during the growing labor agitation of 1850, Bennett denounced the “infamous doctrines of Greeley, Brisbane, and that ilk, who are endeavoring to introduce Paris and European socialism into this country.” In Bennett's judgment, there was “hardly a rich man in this community” who had not risen from poverty by “persevering industry.” Even the late John Jacob Astor had “commenced his career on this continent as a journeyman pedlar.” Bennett's concluding advice to the carpenters was to “cut it”—cut loose from Greeley and Brisbane, and attend to your own business and occupation, faithfully, cheerfully, and with a will, and you will all succeed.”³

Shortly after Bennett's article appeared, Greeley reported on

¹Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 383. In addition to the contribution of Wilentz, my understanding of the political activities of New York workers in the early 1850s is indebted to Robert Ernst's “The One and Only Mike Walsh,” *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 26 (1952): 43–65, and to the coverage in the *New York Herald* and the *New York Daily Tribune*.

²Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, p. 383.

³*New York Herald*, 5 May 1850, p. 2.

a group of Anglican clergy who had helped organize a tailors' cooperative in London. Praising them for recognizing that "Socialism is only Christianity applied in the practical affairs of Labor and Property," Greeley impatiently asked when he might see a "similar manifestation" from U.S. Protestants.⁴ Tirelessly advocating the political and economic empowerment of the poor, Greeley frequently chastised complacent Christians for the ways in which they harmonized their faith with glaring social injustice. For instance, in *Hints toward Reforms*, a compilation of his addresses and journalistic pieces on labor and other social issues, Greeley caustically adumbrates the typical Christian arguments against reform:

Of course, he [the Christian] does not wish to deny that evils exist; he readily admits that, and contends it is divinely ordained that so it should be. He seeks not to deny that whole neighborhoods are famishing;—but what of it? Did not Christ say, "The poor ye have *always* with you?" And who should seek to falsify the Savior's prediction? Starvation and wretchedness are by Heavenly appointment—sent to discipline portly, well-to-do Christians in the exercise of Charity. Thus the Poor famish, but that only proves the extent of Human perversity, the desperate viciousness and depravity of the lower class, or the fierceness of the Divine wrath against Sin.⁵

Such arguments were not unfamiliar to Melville. The writer lived in New York from late 1844 to late July 1850, when he moved his family to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, which was also serviced by the larger New York newspapers. Merton Sealts reports that the Melville household subscribed to the *New York Herald* and that Melville also sometimes read Greeley's

⁴*New York Daily Tribune*, 1 June 1850, p. 4. Championing the cause of labor reform, the *Tribune* regularly reported on various trade groups. For instance, during every day of May 1850, under the recurring headline of "Labor Movements," it related the organizing meetings of groups of workers ranging from tobacco-pipe makers and shade painters to bakers, bookbinders, and box and portfolio makers. The supportive coverage usually included passages from speeches that justified the formation of unions (and thus might also inspire other trade groups to take similar actions). In contrast, the *Herald's* coverage was less frequent, the articles briefer, and attendant editorials warned against the socialist ravings of Greeley and others of similar mind.

⁵Horace Greeley, *Hints toward Reforms, in Lectures, Addresses, and Other Writings* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1850), pp. 183–84.

Tribune.⁶ In addition, either Herman or his brother Allan (their families shared the same New York residence) bought Greeley's *Hints toward Reforms* hot off the press in May 1850.⁷ In short, by 1850 Melville was well aware of the tensions, political struggles, and ideological discourse that characterized relations between New York workers and their employers. In the composition of "Bartleby," this subversive tradition and the author's painful personal experience combined in a rich, creative synergy to produce a stunningly original analysis of employer-employee relations that stands as fit culmination and enduring witness to this indigenous antebellum tradition of radical political economy.

"Bartleby" in Context

Melville was aware of the material conditions and social forces that were transforming New York, and he skillfully incorporates many of these factors into "Bartleby." For instance, the story's setting reflects the city's lightning transformation into an industrial, commercial, and financial center. Rapid growth (New York's population increased from 124,000 to 814,000 between 1820 and 1860) and the attendant rise in real estate prices pushed buildings upward, like those that hem in the office of Bartleby's employer. Burgeoning real estate prices also forced workers out of lower Manhattan in search of cheaper living quarters, which created an urban work environment severed from friendly and familiar relationships. Wall Street, in Melville's depiction, is, after work hours, as "deserted as

⁶Merton Sealts, *Melville's Reading* (rev. ed., Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), p. 88.

⁷Sealts, *Melville's Reading*, p. 61. The *Tribune* did a predictable job of advertising its publisher's forthcoming volume. Page 2 of the 2 May 1850 issue contains almost four, full-page columns of excerpts from *Hints* which provide a pithy overview of Greeley's social philosophy. If Melville read the entire article, his interest would have been especially piqued by the inclusion of a brief essay on "Flogging in the Navy," a topic that deeply concerned him. On 29 May the first page of the *Tribune* announced that *Hints* had "just been handsomely issued by Harper & brothers." Approximately one-half of the book's four hundred pages are devoted to the labor issue.

Petra . . . an emptiness," a space "entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations."⁸

Although the number of employees is small, working conditions in the law office mirror the rapid pace, hierarchical division of labor, and impersonality characteristic of the larger shop and factory that were replacing the traditional artisanal shop in which master, journeyman, and apprentice worked and sometimes lived together.⁹ Thus the lawyer is constantly responding to the hurried pressure of his business, and he knows little about the lives of his clerks.

The period's growing social stratification is everywhere obvious, from the spectacularly rich John Jacob Astor, whom the lawyer proudly served, to the upper-middle-class lawyer himself, and down to his lowly paid employees.¹⁰ For these wage-earners, the prospects for social mobility are slim: Turkey is still a copyist in his old age; Nippers is a frustrated would-be lawyer. Gingernut has been placed in the office by his father, a cart-driver, with the hope that he will learn law, but this aspiration for advancement seems unrealistic, for the lawyer appears to exercise no parental or professional guidance, and the office work is so boring that Gingernut eagerly absents himself on errands.

Attention to the Wall Street setting and the sharp class divisions in the workplace clarify the symbolic function of the

⁸Herman Melville, "Bartleby," *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1987), pp. 27, 36. Subsequent citations in the text are to this edition.

⁹For an overview of this process of economic and social transformation, see American Social History Project, *Who Built America?* vol. 1 (New York: Pantheon, 1989), pp. 221-68, 319-64. For accounts of the transition from artisanal to mass production, the concomitant increase in social stratification, the alteration of relationships in the workplace, and the growing dependency of workers, see David Montgomery, "The Working Classes of the Pre-Industrial American City, 1780-1830," *Labor History* 9 (Winter 1968): 3-22; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, esp. pp. 107-216; and Richard Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis: Class, Ethnicity, and Youth in Antebellum New York City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 34-67, 123-61.

¹⁰Edward Pessen describes the social stratification of this period, relating the growing inequality to the large-scale forces of economic transformation, in *Riches, Class, and Power Before the Civil War* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1973).

story's omnipresent physical barriers: the prison walls, the tall brick structures that surround the law office, and the folding glass doors and portable screen that divide it internally. Paraphrasing Emerson's trope, the walls are natural facts which suggest social and psychological facts: the densely developed urban setting that separates the story's characters from nature; the growing impersonality not only of the workplace but of the larger society; the barriers to job advancement and social mobility that lock the copyists into their positions as poorly paid wage-earners; the social divisions that separate the capitalist elite (alluded to in the reference to John Jacob Astor), the middle class represented by the lawyer, and the working-class copyists and office boy; and, most important, the underlying economic and utilitarian assumptions that alienate the lawyer not only from his workers but also from his deepest self.

The central interest of the story, however, is the confrontation between Bartleby and the lawyer. On the one hand, the lawyer exemplifies the values and attitudes of the Protestant entrepreneur who fused his Christian faith with emerging economic practices in such a way as to legitimate inequality and class privilege. On the other hand, Bartleby's principled refusal to work (as well as the frustrations of the other clerks) is a response to the impersonal, unequal, and exploitative working conditions that were inspiring an organized working-class resistance.

The conflict in the story is, like the opposing positions of Bennett and Greeley, part of an ongoing ideological struggle between capital and labor in the decades prior to the Civil War. Apologists for the emerging wage-labor system heralded a period of growing material abundance produced by an economy consistent with the values of a Christian republic. The U.S., it was argued, unlike Europe, did not have an impoverished class. Opportunity was abundant and workers were free of exploitation. Poverty was either transient or the consequence of vice and could be vanquished by exercising Protestant virtue. This halcyon view was given succinct summary in an address by Alexander H. H. Stuart to the American Institute of the City of New York:

Here we see no class of our population subsisting on wages of six-pence or a shilling a day! Here we have no necessity for factory bills, or a system of legislative police to guard the operative against the exactions of his employer. Here a competency is within the reach of every man who is disposed to exercise ordinary industry and frugality; and the labouring portion of the community is prosperous and happy.¹¹

In such a society, capital and labor were "natural allies and mutually beneficial":¹² the former offered jobs, the latter gave back profits. Market forces arbitrated fair prices for all commodities, including labor. Capital's moral obligation to workers was to disabuse them of radical political ideas and to encourage churchgoing and the attendant employee virtues, especially temperance.

In opposition to this dominant viewpoint, which Sean Wilentz has discussed as the ideology of "entrepreneurial benevolence,"¹³ a minority position emerged which attacked the power of capital and defended the rights of the proletariat. Despite their differing views on particular economic issues, spokesmen for this radical tradition, which included such economists and working-class advocates as Cornelius Blatchley, Daniel Raymond, Langdon Byllesby, William Maclure, William Heighton, and Thomas Skidmore, shared a common concern about the dangers of a laissez-faire economy and the growing concentration of private property.¹⁴ They emphasized the natural right of all to the property or work necessary for a decent livelihood. Moreover, whereas the spokesmen for capital restricted equality to a formal political definition, champions of the working class argued that political democracy required a high degree of social democracy. Without economic equality, they insisted, the rich would control the government, using it to

¹¹Alexander H. H. Stuart, *Anniversary Address before the American Institute of the City of New York* (New York: James Van Norden & Co., 1844), p. 9.

¹²Stuart, *Anniversary Address*, p. 10.

¹³Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, pp. 145-53, 302-6.

¹⁴For a brief summary of the political economies of these writers, see David Harris, *Socialist Origins in the United States: American Forerunners of Marx, 1817-1832* (Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum Ltd., 1966).

serve their own interests, and workers would become increasingly disfranchised and impoverished. Much of this argument receives brief summary in a passage by Raymond:

Wealth is power, and the more unequally property is divided, the greater will be the power of one class of citizens over the destinies of another, and usually the larger class. This creates personal dependence, and produces to a certain extent, the condition, if not physically, at least morally, of lord and vassal, master and slave.¹⁵

In his appeals to his fellow workers, Skidmore, who bluntly called for an immediate and equal redistribution of property, argued that the Declaration of Independence had failed to articulate a crucial unalienable human right. All citizens were entitled to property, Skidmore declared, "not because they had a certain being for a parent . . . not because of purchase, of conquest, of preoccupation, or what not; but BECAUSE THEY ARE; BECAUSE THEY EXIST. I AM; THEREFORE IS PROPERTY MINE."¹⁶ In a manner similar to Melville's depiction of the employer-employee relationship in "Bartleby," Skidmore emphasized the servile dependency of the wage-laborer: "He who can feed me, or starve me; give me employment, or bid me wander about in idleness; is my master; and it is the utmost folly for me to boast of being any thing [*sic*] but a slave."¹⁷ Also like Melville, he presented the workplace as a type of imprisonment, describing the power of wealth as "nothing less than the power to make prisoners of our fellow men."¹⁸

An awareness of the many correlations between "Bartleby" and current social conditions and debates does not in itself explain the mysteries of the story, but it does make a strong *prima facie* case for viewing it as an historicized text more concerned with then-contemporary economic realities than is usually ac-

¹⁵Daniel Raymond, *The Elements of Political Economy*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Baltimore: F. Lucas, Jun. and E. J. Coale, 1823), 1:26.

¹⁶Thomas Skidmore. *The Rights of Man to Property!* (1829; reprinted, New York: Burt Franklin, n.d.), p. 357.

¹⁷Skidmore, *Rights of Man*, p. 388.

¹⁸Skidmore, *Rights of Man*, p. 379.

knowledge¹⁹. But this is not to suggest that the author of "Bartleby" is a social or socialist realist. The story's primary concern is not to expose underlying economic structures, mirror the midcentury New York workplace, or advance a particular ideology. Rather, Melville practices what might be termed a "short-hand realism" that assumes or merely intimates the existence of certain economic conditions so that he can concentrate on his chief interest, which is to disclose the underlying ideological assumptions (that is, the largely unconscious modes of thought and behavior) these new conditions engender.

Melville's "Doctrine of Assumptions"

The story's concern with unconscious thought processes is made explicit in the episode in which the lawyer tries to expel Bartleby from the office by paying him his wages due (\$12) plus a hefty severance allowance (\$20) (pp. 33–35). With the simple phrase "I prefer not to," Bartleby has repeatedly refused to do his employer's bidding. Nonetheless the lawyer is convinced that Bartleby will comply with his dismissal; to do otherwise is simply unthinkable. On his way home, the narrator exalts in the brilliance of his strategy: "I *assumed* [Melville's emphasis] the ground that depart he must; and upon that assumption built all I had to say." But upon awakening the next morning with a mind cleared of its vespertinal vanity, the lawyer begins to entertain doubts: "It was truly a beautiful thought to have assumed Bartleby's departure; but, after all, that assumption was

¹⁹Of the hundreds of published commentaries on "Bartleby," only a handful have placed the story within the economic context of the period. The story's concern with class conflict and the nature of the workplace is briefly discussed in two works by H. Bruce Franklin: "Herman Melville: Artist of the Worker's World," in *Weapons of Criticism: Marxism in America and the Literary Tradition*, ed. Norman Rudich (Palo Alto, Calif.: Ramparts Press, 1976), pp. 287–309, esp. pp. 299–302, and *The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 56–60. Three more detailed readings have placed "Bartleby" within the context of the antebellum transformation of capitalism and the workplace: Louise K. Barnett's "Bartleby as Alienated Worker," *Studies in Short Fiction* 11 (1974): 370–85; Stephen Zelnick's "Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener': A Study in History, Ideology, and Literature," *Marxist Perspectives* 2 (Winter 1979–80): 74–92; and Michael T. Gilmore's "'Bartleby, the Scrivener' and the Transformation of the Economy," *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 132–45.

simply my own, and none of Bartleby's. The great point was, not whether I had assumed that he would quit me, but whether he would prefer so to do. He was more a man of preferences than assumptions."

The misfit between the clerk's behavior and the lawyer's assumptions is given dramatic form when the lawyer arrives at his office. Upon knocking and hearing no response, he assumes Bartleby has departed. "Yes, my procedure had worked to a charm," the lawyer privately boasts; "he indeed must be vanished." Building upon this belief, he even entertains a touch of sadness and guilt over having evicted his clerk: "Yet a certain melancholy mixed with this: I was almost sorry for my brilliant success." Then, by accident, the lawyer taps the door with his knee and reality intrudes. Bartleby responds from within: "Not yet; I am occupied."

This disparity between preconceptions and reality is the subject of the lawyer's subsequent musings. Describing himself as "thunderstruck," he likens his stunned reaction to Bartleby's presence to that of a Virginia man killed by lightning. (Here it seems that Melville designates the man a Virginian to connote his intellectual virginity, that is, his inexperience regarding the complexity of life.) "Pipe in mouth," on a "cloudless afternoon," he had seated himself at "his own warm open window." Obviously anticipating a period of peaceful relaxation in a secure environment, the man's assumptions were rudely splintered by a freak bolt of lightning. This side story glosses the larger narrative not only by calling attention to the gap between conceptions and experience but also by pointing to the presence of an element of dangerous naïveté or pride in those humans, like the Virginian and the lawyer, who smugly assume that the world exists for their sake and that they can understand and control it.

Melville concludes this scene by again underlining the role of the narrator's assumptions:

... was there any thing further that I could *assume* [Melville's emphasis] in the matter? Yes, as before I had prospectively assumed that Bartleby would depart, so now I might retrospectively assume that departed he was. In the legitimate carrying out of this assumption, I might enter my office in a great hurry, and pretending not to see

Bartleby at all, walk straight against him as if he were air. Such a proceeding would in a singular degree have the appearance of a home-thrust. It was hardly possible that Bartleby could withstand such an application of the doctrine of assumptions.

By this concluding point of the brief episode, Melville has rallied some form of the word "assume" no fewer than eleven times. Some critics have attempted to link the final reference to a "doctrine of assumptions" to Christian belief in a bodily ascension into heaven. I believe a more persuasive explanation lies elsewhere.

Legitimizing Capitalist Production

At other points in the plot, the lawyer's assumptions are equally critical, but they differ from those in the above episode in two important respects. First, they cannot be easily confirmed or refuted because they deal not with empirical facts but with abstract values such as "nature," "charity," "justice," and the "rights of property." Second, they are either so commonplace in the culture or so integral to the lawyer's thought and behavior, or both, that he thinks of them not as human constructs but as natural laws operating through common sense. In other words, the lawyer's assumptions are not consciously adopted beliefs but elements in the preconscious mental framework that constitutes his sense of reality. There is much about Antonio Gramsci's conception of the unconscious, or lived, dimensions of hegemony that is reminiscent of Melville's understanding of the nature and role of assumptions. As Raymond Williams has written, Gramsci's definition of hegemony includes not only the "conscious system of ideas and beliefs" but also "the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values." It constitutes the "sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move."²⁰ In order to in-

²⁰Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 109-10.

terpret "Bartleby"—that is, to explain why the lawyer behaves as he does, why Bartleby responds as he does, and why the lawyer is unable to fathom Bartleby's response—it is first necessary to clarify the assumptions, or unconscious dimensions of hegemony, that underlie the lawyer's thoughts and actions. Because of their organic and implicit nature, it is difficult to separate the various components of the lawyer's everyday sense of reality into distinct propositional statements. Still I would suggest that he has, for the most part unconsciously, adopted an outlook upon work and life that includes the following five elements.

Due to nature, vice, and the inexplicable operations of fortune, the working poor are strange and their lives often lamentable. Various critics have pointed out that the lawyer's comfortable, middle-class lifestyle makes him insensitive to the frustration of his employees Nippers and Turkey, who are stuck in dull, low-paying jobs. Turkey's fiery, reckless afternoon work habits are attributed to wine or "red ink" (p. 17), but the lawyer-narrator never asks himself why Turkey drinks; and Nipper's forenoon nervous fits and irritability are deemed to be the consequences of vice and genetics. Thus we are informed that he is the "victim of two evil powers—ambition and indigestion" (p. 16) and that "nature herself seemed to have been his vintner, and at his birth charged him so thoroughly with an irritable, brandy-like disposition, that all subsequent potations were needless" (p. 18).

The narrator's casual attitude toward Turkey's drinking and Nipper's irritability discloses his unwitting predisposition to attribute the emotional and physical distresses of his employees to moral deficiencies and natural causes rather than the emotional toll of their working conditions. Similarly, upon learning that Bartleby lives in his office, he momentarily feels great sorrow but then quickly absolves himself and the social order of any responsibility by imputing Bartleby's condition to an "organic" psychological problem: an "innate and incurable disorder" (p. 29). And for those critics who argue that the narrator develops greater understanding and sympathy during the

course of the story, it should be noted that in the sequel he still characterizes Bartleby as the victim of "nature and misfortune" (p. 45).

Workers are the servants of the boss. The lawyer is also blind to the fact that the hierarchical distribution of labor in his office, which relegates the clerks to copying his documents and promptly performing his behests, is a social construct deriving from an economic system that invests employers with virtually unlimited power over their wage-dependent employees. Instead, he identifies his authority with the natural order; thus Bartleby's refusals strike him not as acts of resistance to an unjust and humiliating subordination but as "violently unreasonable" (p. 22), whereas his own behavior is "perfectly reasonable" (p. 25). He places Bartleby inside his office behind a high screen so that the scrivener may be hidden from view and yet "within easy call, in case any trifling thing was to be done" (p. 19). On the third day of Bartleby's employment, the lawyer relates how he "abruptly called to Bartleby" in "*natural* expectancy of instant compliance" (p. 20, emphasis added). It is in response to this brusque summons that Bartleby issues his first "I would prefer not to" (p. 20).

The lawyer, of course, is blithely unaware of how he enforces a condition of servitude. Nowhere is this more obvious than when, in introducing his staff, he recounts an incident in which Turkey, having enraged him, then curries his favor with an "oriental bow" and the address "with submission, sir" (p. 19). To appreciate the significance of the episode, it should be recalled that the abolition of deference to one's "betters" had been a hallmark of post-Revolutionary society.²¹ Now, however, under the new conditions of worker dependency, Turkey resorts to the most servile deference which, far from mortifying the lawyer, actually serves to mollify his anger. The point, which is repeatedly demonstrated in the story, is clear: despite the na-

²¹Alfred F. Young, "George Robert Twelves Hewes (1742-1840): A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 38 (October 1981): 561-623; American Social History Project, *Who Built America?* pp. 156-77.

tion's official commitment to democratic values, the lawyer feels entitled to exercise despotic power in the workplace. After all, *he* pays the salaries and it is *his* office.

The story suggests that the employer's dominant status, far from being a right based upon common sense or natural law, is the institutionalization of hubris, or that unbounded pride Christianity defines as a sin against the Lord. Sometimes the lawyer arrogates to himself a god-like right to command and punish. For instance, his tone intimates "some terrible retribution" (p. 25) if Bartleby refuses to cooperate; and there is an unmistakable evocation of the voice of the biblical deity in the lawyer's command to Bartleby to "*come forth* and do your duty" (p. 22, emphasis added). (Compare, for example, Zechariah 2:6, "Ho, ho, *come forth* [emphasis in the text], and flee from the land of the north, saith the Lord"; in John 11:43, Christ resurrects Lazarus from his grave by calling out, "Lazarus, *come forth*.")

Capitalism is fully compatible with Christianity. Just as Greeley contemptuously scorned the manner in which Christians accommodated their convictions to capitalism, so Melville, in a similar but more subtle manner, creates two episodes that disclose how the lawyer dismisses the inherent tension between the capitalist concern to maximize one's economic interests and the Christian commandment to love one's neighbor. In the first of these, which reveals how easily the period's sentimental Christianity lent itself to selfishness and a smug self-righteousness, the lawyer approaches Bartleby's noncompliance, coupled as it is at this point with an extraordinary productivity, by rationalizing that toleration will allow him to "cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval" that "will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience" (pp. 23-24). This unconscious pairing of traditional ethical language with the vocabulary of economic exchange and sensual satisfaction is clear evidence of the lawyer's confused moral sense. In a subsequent scene, after a strong verbal attack upon Bartleby, the lawyer, recalling that he and Bartleby are alone in his office, fears for his

safety and so curbs his temper, explaining that he recalled "the divine injunction: 'A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.'" But the lawyer's ensuing comment betrays his inveterate propensity to invoke the language of charity to cloak self-interest: "Aside from higher considerations," he explains, "charity often operates as a vastly wise and prudent principle—a great safeguard to its possessor." If no "better motive can be enlisted," then "self-interest" should "prompt all beings to charity and philanthropy" (p. 36).

To Greeley, conservative Christians had blinded themselves to issues of structural injustice by drawing upon Calvinist social theology. Divinely ordained, poverty instructed the faithful about the worldly wages of sin or, in the case of the deserving poor, provided fit objects for the charity of the rich. Similarly, the lawyer, after consulting Edwards and Priestley, concludes that God had "predestinated from all eternity" that he should provide Bartleby with a home in his office. Ironically, in accepting his role as provider, the lawyer, far from seeing the egotism of his position, attributes to himself a virtuous humility: "Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like me to fathom." Momentarily basking in the rectitude of his commitment (which proves short-lived), he opines that others "may have loftier parts to enact," but his "mission in this world" was to furnish Bartleby with an office-room (p. 37).

Scholarly efforts to determine the intellectual significance of the reference to Edwards and Priestley are, at best, chasing an issue of secondary importance.²² More salient is the fact that the lawyer's ideological assumptions so benight him that instead of recognizing Bartleby's resistance for what it is—a defensive response to the lawyer's demeaning treatment—he finds it more reasonable to consult abstruse theological texts for guidance. And the self-centered understanding he extracts from these sources, far from causing him to question his domination

²²See, e.g., Walton R. Patrick, "Melville's 'Bartleby' and the Doctrine of Necessity," *American Literature* 41 (1969): 39–54, and Allen Moore Emery, "The Alternatives of Melville's 'Bartleby,'" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 31 (1976): 170–87.

over his workers, instead provides him with a divine justification for his class privilege and Bartleby's suffering.

The lawyer's capacity for neighborly solicitude, unbeknownst to him, has constricted to what might be termed "capitalist compassion"—a compassion that is "reasonable" in a culture organized in terms of self-interest. Throughout the story, his charity must be useful to him, serving to stroke his vanity, promote his personal security, increase efficiency in his office, save him from professional embarrassment, or help him to be rid of his unwanted clerk. Melville's point is not that the lawyer is a hypocrite, for hypocrisy implies conscious deception, but that the lawyer is self-deceived by the moral categories developed by nineteenth-century U.S. Christian culture as it accommodated itself to capitalism. He candidly reflects the assumption of the larger culture that there is no inherent contradiction between the dedicated pursuit of self-interest, even when it involves the exploitation of others, and devotion to traditional Christian values.

Emotion has no place in the workplace. In introducing himself, the lawyer takes a quiet pride in asserting, "I seldom lose my temper; much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages" (p. 14). It is not that the lawyer is an unemotional man; rather, he represses his feelings. The outrage to which he refers—the new state constitution's "sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Mastery in Chancery," an office he expected to be a lifetime sinecure—he declares, "a—premature act" (p. 14). Of course the lawyer is not, as he says, "rash" in his characterization; instead of venting his anger, he contains and transmutes it into carefully controlled language. The dash, indicating a hesitant search for a seemingly modifier, and the choice of "premature" bespeak volumes about the lawyer's personality: a "safe" man, he has learned to guard against the direct expression of emotion—especially if it might be construed as critical of established institutions or detract from his professional image. Again and again, the lawyer verges upon violent outrage against Bartleby but manages to restrain himself and speak in decorous tones.

Nor is the lawyer alone in his sense that the expression of feeling is out of place in the office. Turkey and Nippers also attempt, although with notably less success, to repress their resentment about their boring work and the unfairness of the office arrangements. In so doing, they deflect their anger from its proper object. Turkey's ire builds up through the morning and, post-meridian, is vented in a "strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness" (p. 15). Nippers grinds his teeth, hisses maledictions, and experiences "continual discontent" with his writing table (p. 16). Bartleby, on the other hand, at first stifles his emotions so thoroughly that he appears to be the ideal employee, more machine than human, as he copies by day and night "silently, palely, mechanically" (p. 20). When he can no longer maintain this posture and switches to resistance, he still displays a stoic impassivity that breaks down slightly on only two occasions.

Positive as well as negative feelings are held in check. The lawyer strives to preserve the anonymity of the workplace, although occasionally his defenses are penetrated. When he proposes, citing Turkey's advanced age, to limit the clerk's work to morning hours, Turkey effectively appeals by calling attention to the lawyer's own age ("behold these hairs") and reminding him that "we *both* are getting old." Admitting he has difficulty resisting this "appeal to my fellow feeling" and also foreseeing that Turkey would refuse to accept reduced hours, the lawyer reaffirms the existing arrangement (p. 16). Again, when the lawyer thinks that Bartleby is not copying because he has damaged his eyes, he identifies with this seeming health problem and is moved to pity ("I was touched" [p. 32]). And upon discovering that Bartleby lives in the office in complete isolation of family and friends, the lawyer is overcome, for the first time in his life, by a "stinging melancholy" deriving from his sense of their "common humanity" for "both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam" (p. 28). Apparently, the lawyer's barriers to compassion can be momentarily upset, especially if the employee's problems are extreme or of a nature with which he can easily identify. In such instances, however, he quickly restores his defenses, as in the last example, when his melancholy and pity rapidly give way

to a "prudential feeling" and the dictates of "common sense" (p. 29), thus effectively absolving him from any need to show further concern.

Hints about the source of such repression emerge in the lawyer's language and in the way he structures his office. The scale, complexity, interdependency, and competitive nature of a modern capitalist economy require highly rationalized business relations and a workforce that operates with machine-like regularity. Despite their almost instinctual rebellion against their exploitation, the clerks, dependent upon their jobs for survival, struggle to curb their spirits rather than express feelings that might disrupt the work process or anger the boss. Unlike the scribes, the lawyer does not have to please an immediate superior, but in order to insure the success of his practice he must prove himself a responsible businessman who conforms to the accepted practices and values of his profession. His success stems from his reputation as an "eminently *safe* man" whose strong points are "prudence" and "method" (p. 14). He cannot allow himself to acknowledge and sympathize with the suffering of his employees, for to do so would require him to examine the moral underpinnings of their relationship and, ultimately, to make a radical change in his life. In short, the characters in "Bartleby" have been shaped by various economic requirements, inducements, and threats to assume without question that emotion is taboo in the workplace.

Property rights are supreme. Underlying all of these ideological themes is the more fundamental assumption of the primacy of the rights of private property—the right to unlimited acquisition of property and its unregulated use. In the operations of both the lawyer's mind and his office, the story discloses how the nation's commitment to property rights undermines its professed commitment to such democratic values as freedom and equality. The growing power of property is firmly established in the opening movement by the lawyer's almost worshipful reference to John Jacob Astor, for Astor's name was synonymous with aristocratic wealth, monopoly power, the exploitation of subordinates, and the unvarnished use of wealth to bend state

and national government to suit his private interests.²³ That the lawyer is proud of having worked for Astor indicates that he is largely comfortable with Astor's values and unconcerned about or unaware of the threat they pose to a republican polity. It is also relevant that the lawyer was given the political sinecure of judge of the New York Court of Chancery. The original purpose of the system of chancery was to supplement the regular judicial system and to temper and correct the rigidity of written law by allowing for the imposition of judgments based upon natural law and conscience.²⁴ Both the appointment of the lawyer, who describes himself as someone who would "seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages (p. 14) and then the abolition of the chancery a few years later suggest the growing power of capital and the diminution of natural rights and moral argument. Although the lawyer deplors the termination of the court, he demonstrates no righteous concern for the well-being of the citizenry but simply bitterness at being personally deprived of a "life-lease of the profits" (p. 14).

For the lawyer, property rights clearly supersede other rights, including equality and the rights to privacy and material necessities. Upon discovering that Bartleby is homeless and lives in the office, the lawyer experiences little compunction in violating his privacy by unlocking his desk in search of personal information. This is justifiable, the lawyer tells himself, because "the desk is mine, and its contents too" (p. 28). Similarly, the lawyer asserts his property rights over Bartleby's need for shelter and security: "What earthly right have you to stay here? Do you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?" (p. 35).

Bartleby's Resistance and the Lawyer's Obligation

The lawyer's final attempt to provide for Bartleby and soothe his own conscience constitutes one of the story's most baffling moments. The lawyer offers to help his charge find new em-

²³Zelnick, "Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener,'" pp. 75-79.

²⁴The function of the chancery is discussed by Irving Adler, in "Equity, Law and Bartleby," *Science and Society* 51 (Winter 1987-88): 468-74.

ployment: to copy in a different law office, to clerk in a dry goods store, to tend bar, to serve as a rural bill collector, or to provide companionship for a young gentleman traveling in Europe. This list of alternatives would resolve a number of possible dissatisfactions. If Bartleby did not like working for the lawyer, then he could copy for another employer. If he did not like copying itself, then he could choose a quite different occupation. If he preferred outdoor work or a rural environment, he could collect payments in the countryside. If his essential dissatisfaction were only with the routine or tedium of his work or even with its impersonality, then he could choose the adventure of European travel in the company of "some young gentleman" (p. 41).

Bartleby declines all of these offers and so his complaint seems to be more fundamental than mere personal preference. Three times Bartleby simply states: "I am not particular." Melville spins a pun on the adjective. On the one hand, Bartleby is saying that he is not particular, or "choosey," about the work he does; his dissatisfaction is not with the work environment or the nature of the work but with the employer-employee relationship. In terms of the inherent inequality of the workplace, his experience in the law office is typical; he would be no happier in any other job that also relegated him to a position of servitude. On the other hand, by stressing that he is not "particular," Bartleby is also asserting that he is not "unique" but a member of a class: dependent, wage-earning employees. Thus his dissatisfaction is not directed specifically at the lawyer and would not be resolved by his personally finding a more comfortable position. For example, despite appearances of equality and friendship, if he were to serve as a traveling companion, this job would also be defined by the terms of the wage system, and Bartleby's protest is against the injustice of the system itself.

But what exactly is the moral demand raised by Bartleby? and by "Bartleby" itself? "[F]or a hundred years, no critic, so far as I know, has come out with a definite statement as to what I should have done or what he himself would have done in my

place."²⁵ So asserts the lawyer in Henry A. Murray's imagined dialogue among the attorney, Bartleby, a psychologist, literary critics, and Melville. It is easy to criticize the lawyer, and many readers have deplored his more obviously self-serving moralizing. Not infrequently, his character is rather quickly summed up as that of the hypocritical Christian or uncaring capitalist. But it should also be obvious that the narrator is in many respects an extraordinarily patient and sensitive man. Few would go to the measures that he does to provide for an unproductive, uncommunicative, and unwanted employee. The fact that the lawyer repeatedly tries to care for Bartleby (in marked contrast to the other tenants of the building and the lawyer who subsequently rents the office) has led some critics to argue that he is indeed a virtuous man or that he is a good Christian whose moral intentions are frustrated by human finitude and the tragic character of earthly existence. But both of these approaches are inadequate. The story calls instead for a complex assessment of the lawyer's behavior that precisely recognizes the source of his conundrum. That source, I am convinced, lies in the new economic forces and unconscious ideological influences that virtually assure that even the best of employers will subordinate humanitarian concerns to considerations of profit.

Even if the lawyer had demonstrated genuine compassion, he could not have solved Bartleby's problem. Because the story calls attention to the injuries done to a class of people and to an ideology that masks injustice, it also points to the need for structural reform and a new set of assumptions about the proper ordering of society. Thus only superficially is the lawyer's failure a lack of charity; on a more substantive level, he fails to muster the intellectual honesty, imagination, and courage to respond to the demands of justice.

A proper moral response would require, as an initial, minimal step, that the lawyer stop treating Bartleby as a commodity and recognize him as a fellow human being. This is borne

²⁵Henry A. Murray, "Bartleby and I," in *"Bartleby the Scrivener": A Symposium*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1966), pp. 5-6.

out by two episodes in which Bartleby considers the possibility of relaxing his resistance in response to signs of possible change in the lawyer. The first occurs when the lawyer, in addition to repeating his earlier efforts to reason with Bartleby, professes friendship: "I feel friendly towards you." Bartleby struggles to maintain his usual passivity, but the lawyer notes "the faintest conceivable tremor of . . . [his] white attenuated mouth," and for the first time Bartleby implies that he may become more cooperative in the future by adding an important modifier to his usual assertion of resistance: "*At present* I prefer to give no answer" (emphasis added). The lawyer continues to suggest his friendship by "familiarly" drawing his chair behind Bartleby's screen and entreating him "as a friend" to be "a little reasonable" and comply with the office's normal routines. Again Bartleby conditions his refusal: "At present, I would prefer not to be a little reasonable" (p. 30). In the second episode, the lawyer opens the possibility of establishing a friendly and even quasi-familial relationship by addressing Bartleby "in the kindest tone I could assume" and inviting him to share his home: "will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my dwelling—and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure?" And again Bartleby modifies his customary response: "No: at present I would prefer not to make any change at all" (p. 41).

These passages are important because they show not only that Bartleby is personally touched by the intimations of a more personal or caring employer but also that he is not, as various critics have proposed, schizophrenic, autistic, or suffering from some other form of personality disorder.²⁶ Neither does he ap-

²⁶For a sampling of the criticism that sees Bartleby as a helpless victim of psychosis, see William P. Sullivan, "Bartleby and Infantile Autism: A Naturalistic Explanation," *Bulletin of the West Virginia Association of College Teachers* 3 (1976): 43–60, and Morris Beja, "Bartleby and Schizophrenia," *Massachusetts Review* 19 (1978): 555–68. Although these strike me as unconvincing arguments which divest the story of its social significance, I think the more recent psychoanalytic interpretation of Fred A. Whitehead, Bruce S. Liese, and Michael J. O'Dell, in "Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener': A Case Study," *New York State Journal of Medicine* (January 1990): 17–22, which finds Bartleby to be suffering from "major depression," is more consistent with Melville's purpose of depicting a thoroughly alienated worker who despairs of the possibility of substantive change in the wage-labor system.

pear to be a nihilist nor prisoner of an absurd universe.²⁷ Rather, meaningful communication is possible, and Bartleby is open to change but prudently awaits further evidence of a genuine transformation on the part of the lawyer. Bartleby's knowledge of the lawyer justifies this caution, and it should be noted that even in his professions of friendship, the lawyer continues to appeal to reason (i.e., his normal manner of conducting business) and convenience, thus betraying his ongoing concern to deal with Bartleby in a utilitarian manner.

Bartleby's circumspection is also warranted by his awareness of what is actually required of the lawyer. Since Bartleby is ultimately protesting the unjust treatment of the working class, a genuine act of friendship would not be an act of pity but a recognition of the justice of Bartleby's complaint. It would ultimately have to become an act of solidarity, requiring a conversion of the lawyer—a conversion in his personal values, in the office work arrangements, and in his understanding of and mode of relating to the larger society. This is not to say that he must, à la youthful Pierre, hazard all in an immediate effort to bring Wall Street up to celestial standards, but he would have to do what he could to effect change in the larger society. Such revolutionary transformation is unlikely from anyone who has not suffered sharply from the prevailing system and doubly unlikely from a prosperous commercial lawyer noted for his safe and prudent ways.

Contrary to what much scholarship would suggest, the central issue in "Bartleby" is not whether the lawyer makes a satisfactory response to Bartleby (he does not) or is a good man (he is well intentioned but immersed in a bad system) but what it is that makes the lawyer unable to understand Bartleby and to respond with compassion. Melville wanted to show how the lawyer's mental and moral imprisonment within a complex web

²⁷Kingsley Widmer makes the major argument for Bartleby as nihilist hero in "Bartleby" and Nihilistic Resistance," *The Ways of Nihilism* (Los Angeles: California State Colleges, 1970), pp. 91-125. "Bartleby" has been read as presenting an existentialist philosophy of the absurd by Ronald Donald Spector, "Melville's 'Bartleby' and the Absurd," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 16 (1961): 175-77, and Maurice Friedman, "Bartleby and the Modern Exile," in *"Bartleby": A Symposium*, pp. 64-81.

of lived ideology blinded him to the injustice of both the larger economic system and the organization of work and reward in his own office. But it is central to Melville's narrative strategy that this be done indirectly.

"Bartleby" does not issue an explicit call for revolution or provide a blueprint for a new society. Rather, Melville wanted his audience, subject to the same economic forces and cultural values as the lawyer, to experience his sense of exasperation and puzzlement. If readers first identified with the lawyer and then subsequently came to understand the injustice inherent in his mental habits and conduct, then they would have experienced two realities: a sense of the compelling power of these assumptions and a recognition that the construction of a moral society required significant change in both the economic system and its legitimating ideology.

An economic interpretation that emphasizes the unconscious ideology of the emerging capitalist wage-labor system not only provides for a comprehensive reading of "Bartleby" but also contains an implicit explanation for competing interpretations. Psychological readings that diagnose Bartleby as suffering from an incurable disorder, philosophical readings that posit the inherent limitations of human dialogue and moral effort, Christian readings that indict the lawyer for a failure of charity, and bourgeois readings that view the lawyer as a benevolent entrepreneur—all ascribe the story's crisis to the shortcomings of an individual character or human nature itself, and in so doing they share a fundamental (and largely unconscious) premise: namely, that our capitalist economy and its ideological underpinnings are not subject to question because they are commensurate with the rational or natural ordering of society. In short, such interpretations are governed by the same assumptions that inform the lawyer's narrative. That such readings would become dominant, given that our post-World War II society, which has produced the bulk of Melville criticism, is structured by the same political economy that existed in the era of "Bartleby," is completely congruous with the marxian premise of the story, and of this interpretive methodology, that material conditions significantly influence consciousness.

It was only with the decline in anti-communism and the concomitant questioning of capitalism brought about by the U.S. debacle in Vietnam, which fostered, among other things, a reexamination of our nation's social and labor history, that the economic reading of "Bartleby" developed. The benefits of such a reading reside not only in its greater explanatory power but also in its relevance to an era marked by the dominance of multinational capital and the increasing exploitation of labor on a global scale, including (and of more immediate relevance to classroom pedagogy) the growing numbers of high school and university students in part-time jobs. While often having a hope for social mobility that Bartleby lacked, they nevertheless bring to the story a personal experience of being anonymous, low-paid employees that resonates with Melville's account of the plight of the dependent wage laborer. "Bartleby" provides them with an occasion to analyze this experience and reflect upon its moral and political significance.

David Kuebrich is an Associate Professor of English at George Mason University and author of *MINOR PROPHECY: WALT WHITMAN'S NEW AMERICAN RELIGION*.