

The Lawyer and the City: Emerging Landscapes in “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street”

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“Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street” (1853), arguably Herman Melville’s most discussed short story, has inspired so many interpretations that the only definite conclusion about the story seems to be that it is indefinable.¹ Yet the wide range of readings that this story generates, varying from the mythological to the historical, seem to revolve around the ethereal figure of the scrivener and his confined space; of the mixture of its symbolic aspect and realistic aspect that makes the story a fine allegory, the symbolic side tends to be stressed. In this essay, I attempt to read this story as the lawyer’s, rather than the scrivener’s, in order to find a way to closely examine the composition of its cityscape. *Bartleby*, conceived at the dawn of modern New York, offers an intriguing portrait of the city, emerging from the author’s impression of the city placed in dialogue with other depictions of the city.

Relatively little critical attention has been devoted to Melville as a writer of novels set in cities. Traditional criticism has focused mainly on Melville’s sea-based novels, locating the writer in the canonical tradition of anti-urbanism and pastoral idealism. His cities were understood as the antithesis of the freedom represented by nature, and as something to escape from. Indeed, Melville’s pronounced dislike of the “Babylonish brick-kiln,” contrasted with his reclusive cottage in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, only reinforces this point.² However, due to heavy focus on Melville’s sea-based novels, there is sometimes the risk of simply dismissing his city novels as literary failures. Recent studies have cast a new light on Melville’s land-based novels and reconsider them in relation to nineteenth-century urban life and to other literary forms. The most representative of these studies is Wyn Kelley’s *Melville’s Cities*, which reads Melville’s novels as a series of the writer’s interaction with his native city’s development, tracing the change in the urban place as a literary topos that develops throughout his other land-based novels. In discussing *Bartleby*, Kelley shows that the story is at the same time a dialogue with “the City of Man,” a discourse prominent in the popular imagination at that time, and a highly

personal reaction to the emerging new city by a writer who identified himself as a part of the old town.

Kelley redefines city novels in relation to the interaction between the form of the city and its culture, developing a way to discuss *Bartleby* along with other representations of the cityscape emerging in the same period. Other examples of studies that focus on the cultural space in which the literary works participate include David Reynolds's *Beneath the American Renaissance* and Michael Rogin's *Subversive Genealogy*. These works are especially useful in reading a writer like Melville, in whose work the symbolical and the realistic are intertwined, without undermining either aspect.

If we shift the focus to the lawyer, *Bartleby* can be read as Herman Melville's most thorough contemplation of emerging space in New York City in the mid-nineteenth century. The writer's attempt is twofold; he uses the city as a topos adequate to represent urban solitude and abandonment, and at the same time responds to the emerging new city landscape. The former aspect is evident in the continuity between his novels, especially between *Bartleby* and *Redburn* (1848). The latter aspect will be clear by comparing it with Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* (1868).

Although Melville lived in various places, he was a native of New York City. He was born in New York in 1819 in a wealthy merchant family. Both his parents were Hudson Valley aristocrats, the Melville family was a chartered member of the "Old" New York, as Edith Wharton would have referred to it. However, the economical Panic of 1837 wrecked his father's business and deprived the family of its privilege. The family was eventually forced to leave the city and move to Albany. By the time Melville returned to the city in 1866 as an unsuccessful writer, he was reduced to taking a job as a customs inspector at the piers at Gansevoort Street, a job that he held until 1885. Till the time of his death as a forgotten writer in 1891, Melville had led an unhappy family life in poverty and obscurity. Manhattan, to Melville, was mostly the scene of frustration and despair.

Perhaps Melville's mixed feeling about the city may account for its treatment in the earlier novels. Even when he writes about the city, his focus is on aspects other than depicting the city itself. In *Moby-Dick* (1851), Ishmael leaves from "City of the Manhattoes, belted around by wharves [...] commerce surrounds it with her surf [...]" (795). The focus of the description is Manhattan's being an island; thus, emphasis is laid on its relation to the sea

rather than its being a city. The city crowd is perceived as the land-bound "watergazers" who are "tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks," and whose presence urges Ishmael to leave for the sea. In *Pierre* (1852), symbolic meanings are superimposed on the actual settings, creating the romantic cityscape that provides a backdrop to an immoral relationship. Although one can sense that the city in question is New York, there are few indications of this save for the vague suggestions in the descriptions, such as Broadway is "the great Orinoco thoroughfare" (269).³

In comparison to these two novels, there is a definite shift in the description of the city in *Bartleby*. Here Melville's depiction of the city is realistic. It is geographically and chronologically specific. Along with actual places such as Canal Street and Wall Street, it mentions actual political events such as the abolishment of Chancery, the election of 1849, and the Samuel Colt murder case. Biographical studies reveal that in order to create a character, Melville relied to a great extent on his friend who was a law-copier, and his elder brother's office in Wall Street.⁴ Yet this story is realistic not only due to such material details, but also on account of Melville's desire to record the urban vernacular and its custom through the narrative. Bergmann's *God in the Street*, a study of the nineteenth-century vernacular in American city novels, reveals that nicknames of the clerks in *Bartleby*, for instance, are not randomly chosen, but they have meanings in the contemporary New York slang. Considering the fact that the term "slang" itself was a novel phenomenon at that time, Melville's intention to depict the city as beginning to form an identity, a society and a vernacular, is in itself a very realistic notion; this notion would later be fully realized by American realist writers such as Mark Twain.

It should be noted, however, that the transition from a Romantic city to a Realistic city can also be found in the urban gothic novels from the same period. For example, George Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1848) is a romantic horror novel; the fact that most of its acts take place in the symbolic Monk Hall, which is an edifice of three stories above and below the ground, suggests that the reality in the city is accompanied by the same amount of shadow and mystery. However, it should also be noted that the Monk Hall is located next to the printing factory, an edifice equally symbolic of the realistic landscape to appear. Walt Whitman is another case in point of this transition. Whitman, who has later recorded his enthrallment by the "complicated business genius [...] all this mighty, many-threaded wealth and industry" of Wall Street in *Democratic Vistas* (1871, pp16) and his other journal essays, wrote his only temperance

novel *Franklin Evans* (1842) in which he portrays New York as a sinful city of seduction, vice, and degeneration—a portrait that is considerably different from what he would later depict in *Leaves of Grass* (1855), which is another landmark in the democratic New York landscape.

Although these novels embrace the realistic elements that reflect the city that was emerging at the time, their conception of the city essentially belongs to the former generation of urban gothic novels. *Bartleby*, therefore, stands out of its cohort for its modernity. It achieves a larger thematic effect through its setting rather than through its plot and characters, while faithfully presenting the urban scene with clarity and fullness. Although thematically the story addresses the urban horror as the gothic novels do, the quality of horror that Melville depicts in the story departs from the gothic, entering the realm of the psychological.

In that sense, the strongest overall resonance to this story is found not in Melville's New York stories, but in the half-autobiographical novel *Redburn*, especially in the most memorable chapter entitled "What Redburn Saw in Laucelott's-Hey."⁵ In this chapter Melville narrates the story of Redburn's desperate yet futile struggle to save a dying mother and her children whom he encounters on a sidewalk in Liverpool. They are starving to death, confined in a cellar of an old warehouse, and in perfect indifference of other people. In his vain attempts to save them, ignored not only by the others but also by the subject of his charity, the protagonist comes face-to-face with the world's misery and his own powerlessness. Redburn realizes futility of his desperate yet useless attempts to save the dying mother and her children; it is in this sense that the novel depicts the protagonist's contemplation of humanity, its powerlessness, hypocrisy, and difficulty.

Not many critics mention the connection between these two works, but as Franklin suggests, on the level of the story's setting, this chapter is a proto-*Bartleby*. In the figure of young Redburn, we can see the lawyer in *Bartleby*, who, out of his "spasmodic passions" (553) struggles to save the scrivener who in turn remains impenetrable by the lawyer's humanistic concern. The continuity of these two stories on the thematic level is also evident from the Biblical reference—the story of Abel and Cain as structure, the book of Job, or as Zlogar argues, the repeating image of leprosy. This is evidence that to some extent, with regard to characterization Melville's focus is on the lawyer rather than on the scrivener. Redburn's realization that his humanistic effort only prolongs the victim's suffering occurs with his realization of the emptiness and

desertion of the landscape he is in:

Surrounded as we are by the wants and woes of our fellow-men, and yet given to follow our own pleasures, regardless of their pains, are we not like people sitting up with a corpse, and making merry in the house of the dead? (204)

A miserable street corner in Liverpool is chosen as the appropriate locus to represent the powerlessness of humanity. From the perspective of Melville's lifelong interest in physiognomy, Litman, in "The Cottage and the Temple," discusses Melville's symbolic use of architecture as an example of the writer's lifelong interest to examine the idea that is apparent in the outlook of things. The same idea is applicable to Melville's symbolic/realistic landscapes. Therefore, Melville did not randomly select an urban street corner: this landscape was chosen as a literary topos that was best suited to express his metaphysical concerns. Wall Street in *Bartleby* serves the same purpose. The lawyer contemplates the lonesomeness of the scrivener, whom he romanticizes as the "sole spectator of solitude [...] a sort of innocent and transformed Marius brooding among the ruins of Carthage" (554). Melville links the isolated figure of the scrivener to the location he is in, and Melville's depiction of the Wall-Street almost reads almost as though it were a sequel to Redburn:

Think of it. Of a Sunday, Wall-street is deserted as Petra; and every night of every day it is an emptiness. This building too, which of week-days hums with industry and life, at nightfall echoes with sheer vacancy, and all through Sunday is forlorn. (554)

This passage again emphasizes the sense of desertion. Using the biblical image of Petra to highlight the fact that prosperity is always accompanied by death and decay, Melville found in Wall Street the perfect locale to express his concerns. The image of the deserted streets in two cities is tied up with the psychological horror of human indifference and the egotism and hypocrisy of the petit bourgeois goodwill that could eventually kill other people.

Wall Street in *Bartleby* is not only Melville's observation of a particular city but of urban space in general. Instead of depicting a labyrinthian city of degeneration and brutal violence, as illustrated in gothic novels, Melville has picked the cityscape as a way to describe a landscape that is metaphorically

reflective of the horrors of the modern world. Thus, Melville achieves a transition from the gothic horror to the psychological, naturalistic horror.⁶

If Redburn's forlorn figure on the deserted street offers a glimpse into the characterization of the lawyer, another important aspect of this character can be seen in relation to an actual person who represents the contemporary city:

The late John Jacob Astor, a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method. I do not speak it in vanity, but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion. I will freely add, that I was not insensible to the late John Jacob Astor's good opinion. (547)

John Jacob Astor (1763-1848), the United States' first millionaire, made a fortune through fur-trading and real estate speculation. He was known for his desire to "buy every foot of land on the island of Manhattan" (Spann 208). Already at that time most of Manhattan was nothing but an open ground, he envisioned the future expansion of the city and invested heavily in the area which later came to be known as the Midtown. Astor's aspiration is evidence to the fact that since the beginning, there was an inseparable association between power and money embedded in Manhattan's landscape. In the era of ragged individualism that developed during the Jacksonian democracy, Astor soon came to be regarded as a legendary hero. A self-made man of strong will and ambition, he was characteristic for the city at the dawn of the gilded age. The phenomenal growth of Manhattan was caused by people pouring into the city from the rest of the country and beyond, turning it into a big marketplace. It was this cultural environment that was responsible for the rise of city fiction, a form of popular novels that became immensely popular in the mid-century America.

Particularly prominent among these writers was Horatio Alger, who, through a series of juvenile fiction established a definite version of the New York cityscape. Alger used the same formula in virtually all of his "rags-to-riches" stories. The story revolves around a poor but honest hero who develops into a socially respectable person with the help from an older, socially established male character. The hero is falsely accused of a crime he has not

committed, but is later exonerated and advances in the world. Consequently, the Alger heroes have certain common features: (1) they exercise the power of will, (2) they evolve by changing profession and social status, and (3) their social positions are physically represented in the city's geography.⁷

Ragged Dick, a best-seller that sold 300,000 copies in the nineteenth century, is the Alger archetype, and perhaps the best of its kind. It tells the story of "Ragged" Dick, a smart and aspiring homeless bootblack boy. With some haphazard help from wealthy male strangers, he starts to discipline and educate himself. Finally, he becomes a clerk in a counting house on Pearl Street, and changes his name to Richard Hunter, Esquire.

The name of Astor is symbolically mentioned at the pivotal point of this story. In Chapter Six, Dick meets Frank Whitney and offers Frank a whirlwind tour of the city. This rich country boy whose sophisticated manners inspire Dick to change his life is staying at the "Astor Mansion." This chapter, titled "Up Broadway to Madison Square," contains a vivid description of the city, to the extent that the novel served as a sort of tour guide.⁸ It explains the grid system of the city, shows famous edifices such as Barnum Museum and Trinity Church, and tours Central Park, which is still under construction. All these details educate the reader about the economical landscape of the city:

Third Avenue is a broad street, but in the character of its houses and stores it is quite inferior to Broadway, though better than some of the avenues further east. Fifth Avenue, as most of my readers already know, is the finest street in the city, being lined with splendid private residences, occupied by the wealthiest classes. (43)

As Dick ascends the social ladder, he moves from his "box-hotel" in Five Points to a dingy tenement apartment on Mott Street; the end of the novel sees him moving out because now he "can afford to leave" and he "shall like to live in a nicer quarter in the city" (132). It is implied here that his joke that he shines shoes to pay the rent for his "manshun up on Fifth Avenoo" (4) will become a reality in the future.

I will refer to this landscape as the Alger/Astor New York. It presents the city as it was –divided between the poor and wealthy, and the fantasy Alger novels provide is the possibility of upward social movement. This is represented in the city as physical movement and actual geography. Similar to Melville's use of geography, here also, the landscape is inseparable from the idea. It is this

landscape that *Bartleby* emerges from, and is responding to.⁹

The lawyer, although he presents himself in connection with Astor, is not really an aggressive entrepreneur. He is a “safe” man; old, and although affected by the economic collapse of 1837, still well-off because he maintains a “snug” business with wealthy customers. This character is conceived as a man who is marginal to, but not detached from, the city as the market place. The lawyer’s profile potentially coincides with the readership of *Putnam’s*, the magazine that this story was published in. He is willing to adopt young and hopeful individuals, just as he has done with his office boy, Ginger Nut, “a promising lad” (547). In this story, his Alger-like work ethic and benevolence are placed in a dialogue with Bartleby, the anti-Alger hero.

The lawyer categorizes his employees in the same manner as he classifies himself. He begins with “law-copyist or scriveners”:

The nature of my avocations for the last thirty years has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been written: — I mean the law-copyists or scriveners. (546)

These characters are represented as different “types” with different temperaments and abilities. When the lawyer included Bartleby in his office, he believed that Bartleby “might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey and the fiery one of Nippers” (549); thus, he considered the overall harmony of all human types at his office. It should be noted that at the beginning of the story mentioned above, the lawyer can talk about Bartleby rather calmly just because the story is narrated in retrospect. Bartleby remains the “unaccountable scrivener” (553) throughout the story, but now he is dead and safely categorized as “the dead scrivener.” Throughout the novel, the lawyer and other people try to persuade Bartleby to reveal his identity, or to acquire one by getting a job. However, Bartleby prefers not to make this revelation. Since Bartleby refuses to incorporate a type, his passiveness escalates to the point of aggressiveness that it threatens the other characters:

“I would prefer not to.”

“You *will* not?”

“I *prefer* not.” (552)

It should be noted that the word "will" is stressed by Melville in this famous dialogue, with which Bartleby begins his sweeping denial. On receiving a response from Bartleby, the lawyer attempts to believe that Bartleby is "a man of preference" rather than of will. However, the latter disavows any form of will that might change the present status. As Dillingham concisely puts it, when asked to do something at different points in the narrative, Bartleby adamantly insists upon being "(1) unchanging (2) unconfined (3) unparticular (4) definite and (5) stationary" (43). Bartleby operates upon the intentional refusal of the power of will.

As an Alger hero disciplines himself and aims for faster, richer, and ultimately better lifestyle, Bartleby accelerates in the opposite direction. At first, Bartleby at least does his job, but he gradually begins to refuse his responsibilities and his necessities, one by one. At one point the lawyer realizes that Bartleby has no inputs of any sort (554):

He never spoke but to answer [...] I had never seen him reading [...] he never visited any refectory or eating house [...] he never drank beer or tea and coffee [...] he never went anywhere in particular [...] never went out for a walk [...] he had declined telling who he was, or whence he came, or whether he had any relatives in the world [...] he never complained of ill health. (554)

Melville stresses the smothering sense of confinement created by Bartleby's escalating passivity by making concepts materialize in the landscape. Ideas introduced in the story begin to take a physical form. For instance, "the Wall" mentioned in the name of the street appears as the desk wall that separates Bartleby's desk in the lawyer's office, and the finally, the prison wall of the Tombs.

Whenever threatened by Bartleby's aggressive immobility, the lawyer tries to resort to physical action and movement to resolve the tension, revealing the desire that is at the core of an Alger character. The lawyer begins answering the question on behalf of the scrivener (555). He pleads with the scrivener to move and also agrees to pay for moving expenses (555). Upon refusal from Bartleby, the lawyer decides to move himself:

Since he will not quit me, I must quit him. I will change my offices; I will move elsewhere; and give him fair notice, that if I find him on my new

premises I will then proceed against him as a common trespasser. (611)

This is such an irrational decision made with a sense of fear for Bartleby's immobility. The lawyer is compelled to compensate for Bartleby's immobility with his own mobility. As a result, in response to the stronger refusal on Bartleby's part, the lawyer's reaction becomes even stronger and more irrational than before:

I answered nothing; but effectually dodging every one by the suddenness and rapidity of my flight, rushed from the building, ran up Wall-Street towards Broadway, and jumping into the first omnibus was soon removed from pursuit. [...] for a few days I drove about the upper part of the town and through the suburbs, in my rockaway; crossed over to Jersey City and Hoboken, and paid fugitive visits to Manhattanville and Astoria. In fact I almost lived in my rockaway for the time. (613)

With a sudden and rapid flight, the lawyer heads toward the city and its vicinity, to regain a sense of movement. The trip to Astoria is his attempt to escape and stay away from the contaminated island; it is also a pilgrimage to the place that bears the entrepreneur's name.

In contrast to Bartleby who is created as an anti-Alger character, the lawyer's character as an Alger character becomes apparent. Through the lawyer's movement, *Bartleby* casts light on the emerging landscape of modern New York City, capitalistic and bourgeois, which will be foregrounded in the contemporary popular literature. Seen from the lawyer's point of view, *Bartleby* is Herman Melville's most thorough contemplation of New York City landscape. The writer attempts to respond to the emerging cityscape, and at the same time uses it as a topos adequate to represent the urban solitude and abandonment. In this way, a more complex understanding of Melville's cityscape enables us to recognize a greater degree of intricacy and richness in his tales.

Notes

¹ *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* 2.11 (Nov. 1853), 546-57; 2.12 (Dec. 1853), 609-15. Subsequent quotes are from this edition. Further in this essay *Bartleby* will be italicized when it represents the title, to distinguish it from the character.

² Quoted from a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1851. "The Whale is only half through the press; for, wearied with the long delays of the printers, and disgusted with the heat and dust of the Babylonish brick-klin of New York, I came back to the country to feel the grass, and end the book reclining on it, if I may." For discussion of Melville's use of city image in relation to the tradition in American literature of pastoral and city, see Kelley's "Proud City, Proudest Town"(1-16).

³ In the Hendricks House edition (1949) of *Pierre*, Henry A. Murray provides a detailed coordination of the places mentioned in the novel to the actual New York neighborhoods.

⁴ For a reading of *Bartleby* in relation to Melville's family and the contemporary political situation, See Rogin, especially 192-201.

⁵ Another story that may be considered as a companion piece to *Bartleby* is "Cook-A-Doodle-Do!" published in the December issue of *Harper's Monthly* (1851). For further discussion on this story, see Dillingham, 19-22.

⁶ Another important topos is undoubtedly "The Dead Letter Office at Washington" (614), where *Bartleby* was a clerk. The modern-day equivalent of such an urban air-pocket would be represented by someone like the newspaper delivery man, an important topos of the Japanese novels in the 90s.

⁷ This sense of geography became a strong tradition in the American imagination. To some extent, it has also helped to create the official image of New York from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Its impact on the American realist novel, in particular, is significant. Theodore Dreiser and Edith Wharton are two examples of authors whose novels use Broadway and Fifth Avenue to demonstrate the social ascent/descent of their characters.

⁸ This was actually the part of intended use; allegedly, a large number of mid-western boys immigrated to the city after reading the Alger novels. Literary representations of this phenomenon include Ernest Hemingway's *Nick Adams*.

⁹ As shown by Hans Bergmann's study, the most directly source of *Bartleby* is the genre of popular writing called "New York Stories" (149-57). These are stories written for the middle-class readership in order to decrease their fear of new unfamiliar faces in the city. *Bartleby* was written as a response to this genre in the same way as *Pierre* is placed in a dialogue with the family novels of the time, such as Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1855) or Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1851). However, since the focus of my study is to examine the peculiar cultural landscape of New York City that bred these works, I have chosen the Alger stories that originated from the New York Stories, thereby elucidating the use of geography.

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