

Ere introducing the scrivener, as he first appeared to me,” writes the lawyer in Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853), “it is fit I make some mention of myself, my *employés*, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings.”¹ Intriguingly, the lawyer does not say he met Bartleby; instead, Bartleby “appeared” to him. We might read the word *appeared* as the diction of a man who has practiced law for many years, a profession in which the presence of individuals is often referred to as an “appearance.” Yet in legal phraseology the verb *to appear* is typically followed by the preposition *before*: one always appears before the bench, the judge, or the jury. Bartleby, however, does not appear before the lawyer but, in a crucial change of prepositions, *to* him. Bartleby’s appearance, of course, creates a subtle, dramatic tension, setting up the eventual climax in which he is shown to be quite different from the person he first appears to be. Yet the word *appeared* suggests a stranger possibility: perhaps Bartleby quite literally appeared, as would an apparition.

But what would it mean to take Melville at his word and read Bartleby as an apparition? We would be reminded of what current critics of the story seem to have forgotten: Bartleby is strange. Contemporaneous reviewers certainly saw the story’s occult possibilities. One wrote of Bartleby’s “ghost-like taciturnity”; another called the story a “weird tale,” reminiscent of the eeriness of Poe.² Yet for the most part, this sense of the story’s weirdness has been lost. Nearly all current work on “Bartleby” follows from another critical genealogy—not the occult but the quotidian, with one early reviewer going so far as to call the story “a portrait from life.”³ Marxist criticism of “Bartleby,” in par-

ticular, takes its cue from this sense of the tale as a story of the everyday, casting it as a realistic story, with an emphasis on working life.⁴ This line of criticism began with Louise K. Barnett's seminal essay "Bartleby as Alienated Worker" (1974), in which, as the title suggests, Bartleby is the "perfect exemplum" of Marx's alienated worker and Melville's story a parable of the heartlessness of capitalism.⁵

This early Marxist criticism of "Bartleby" has come under fire from several critics. Pointing to the fact that the lawyer continues to pay Bartleby's salary and to help him even after he has stopped working, Dan McCall suggests that readings of "Bartleby" as a parable of the dangers of capitalism hinge on a fundamental misreading of the text, and of the lawyer in particular, who cannot easily be put into the mold of a typical heartless capitalist.⁶ While McCall seems not to recognize that the motor of capital is the systemic exploitation of the worker to produce surplus value and thus does not depend on the personal characteristics of any one individual, he does point to the problem in early Marxist criticism of "Bartleby": reading the story as a simple parable of the alienated worker cannot account for a number of its aspects, such as Bartleby's ghost-like presence, the sequel of the Dead Letter Office, and the fact that Bartleby refuses many things other than work.

In recent years, Marxist criticism of "Bartleby" has moved from this more thematic approach, which presents the story as illustrative of Marxist concepts, to rigorously historicist readings. While Marx is present methodologically in this later criticism, Marxism's relationship to Melville's critique of capitalism tends not, for historical reasons, to be an overt subject of discussion, since there is no real evidence that Melville was familiar with Marx's writings at the time he composed "Bartleby." Instead, these critical interventions root "Bartleby" in labor debates going on in New York City at the time of the story's composition and publication. The subtitle itself seems to suggest such a reading, offering this strange, inexplicable scrivener as "A Story of Wall Street." As David Kuebrich has shown, Melville was well aware that Wall Street was a hotbed of labor activism and knew of political debates about the rights of workers. The decision to situate Bartleby's story on Wall Street, Kuebrich suggests, was Melville's deliberate and politically inflected choice.⁷ Along similar lines, Barbara Foley skillfully argues that the story cannot be understood without "a familiarity with mid-nineteenth-century class

struggles in New York—and with the contemporaneous discourse about those struggles”—suggesting that the Astor Place riot of 1849 “provides a covert historical subtext” to the story.⁸ Sheila Post-Lauria, unearthing the labor history of the text in a different way, relates its publication history. “Bartleby”’s publisher, *Putnam’s Monthly*, in contrast to its competitor *Harper’s Magazine*, featured stories that uncovered “‘characteristic life in the cities’”; as a result, “many stories [in *Putnam’s*] discussed the plight of employees.”⁹

Whether consciously or not, this recent historical work responds to criticism of the earlier Marxist interventions by providing a context for “Bartleby” that convincingly suggests its investment in labor politics. This rich historicization points emphatically toward the plight of the worker, yet if the earlier criticism levied against Marxist readings of the story has shown us anything, it is that we cannot read “Bartleby” simply as a Marxist parable. Nevertheless, the long critical history that puts Marx and Melville into conversation, albeit often a one-sided one, means that “Bartleby” provides a framework and a language to rethink these Marxist projects of the 1970s. That is, if the criticism of “Bartleby” offers a way of understanding Melville’s story through Marxism—however problematically—perhaps a return to the text of “Bartleby” can contribute to current work on Marx.

In returning to “Bartleby” as a “weird tale,” I hope to allow a reading of Marx that attends not only to the material but also the immaterial in his analysis of the commodity and of capitalism. This reading of Marx will help us understand what seems to be a jarring contradiction: how can “Bartleby” be both a “weird tale” and simultaneously a “portrait from life”? By reading “Bartleby” and Marx against and through one another, I will ultimately suggest that Melville’s “Bartleby” is more than just a parable of the heartlessness of capitalism. The story is a complex meditation on the structure and workings of capitalism and of circulation under capitalism, in which this strange apparition of Bartleby allows us to reconsider Marx’s analysis of the commodity in terms of the spectrality of capitalism itself.

“A Mildly Cadaverous Reply”

From the beginning of “Bartleby,” it is clear that something about this new scrivener is amiss. Answering the lawyer’s advertisement

for copyists, Bartleby arrives on the doorstep of the law office as “a motionless young man” (19). Bartleby’s strange inertness quickly transforms into an eerie question of life and death, for soon Bartleby, summoned by the lawyer, responds “[l]ike a very ghost, agreeably to the laws of magical invocation” and “appear[s] at the entrance of his hermitage” (25). Once Bartleby has been compared to a ghost, he begins to act like one. Stopping by the office on a Sunday, the lawyer knocks on the door and “the apparition of Bartleby appear[s],” the significance of “appear” emphasized by the lexical tautology of an apparition’s appearing (26).

Yet Bartleby is not just an apparition; he is also a corpse. The lawyer further describes Bartleby on that Sunday morning as having a “cadaverously gentlemanly *nonchalance*” (27). Melville’s descriptors here are remarkably specific. Bartleby’s demeanor is not that of a cadaver who is (or, more properly, was) a gentleman. Instead, Bartleby is gentlemanly *in a cadaverous way*. We cannot read this description as simply pointing to a past state—Bartleby as a gentleman before he died (ignoring here, if possible, the fact that he has not died). Clearly the thrust is that Bartleby is still a gentleman (or gentlemanly, at least) while simultaneously being cadaverous. We might say that Bartleby is deadly alive, or alive dead. Either way, Melville presents a conundrum. Bartleby is both an apparition and a gentlemanly cadaver. In fact, it is the apparition of Bartleby that carries itself in such a cadaverously gentlemanly way. If Bartleby is an apparition, he is not a mere ghost. He is an apparition of something in between life and death: a gentlemanly cadaver. “Bartleby” is thus no simple ghost story, for the specter of Bartleby is a strange admixture of the bodily and the ghostly. Bartleby is no more properly a spirit than he is a run-of-the-mill scrivener; he is an apparition *and* a scrivener, a cadaver *and* a gentleman, and he is “haunting the building generally” (40).

Melville renders the strange amalgam that is Bartleby as particularly figural. The lawyer, after Bartleby’s first refusal to proofread his own copy, complains: “I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors” (21). The lawyer is not alone in his equation of Bartleby and Cicero, the historical figure perhaps most associated with rhetoric. Bartleby himself, it seems, identifies with Cicero: ostensibly listening to the lawyer’s reasoned pleadings about work, Bartleby instead “kept his glance fixed upon

[the lawyer’s] bust of Cicero” (30). This kinship between Bartleby and Cicero is strengthened by its context, for it emerges at moments when Bartleby is at odds with the lawyer. Bartleby’s “rhetoricity” thus stands in opposition to the reason of the lawyer, suggesting that the text juxtaposes the rhetorical—as it comes to be signaled by Cicero—to the logical (or at least the lawyer’s logic):

“These are your own copies we are about to examine. It is labor saving to you, because one examination will answer for your four papers. It is common usage. Every copyist is bound to help examine his copy. Is it not so? Will you not speak? Answer!”

“I prefer not to,” he replied in a flute-like tone. It seemed to me that while I had been addressing him, he carefully revolved every statement that I made; fully comprehended the meaning; could not gainsay the irresistible conclusion; but, at the same time, some paramount consideration prevailed with him to reply as he did.

“You are decided, then, not to comply with my request—a request made according to common usage and common sense?”

He briefly gave me to understand that on that point my judgement was sound. Yes: his decision was irreversible. (22)

Bartleby does not reach a different conclusion about the common usage and common sense of checking his copy; indeed, he “fully comprehend[s] the meaning” of the lawyer’s logic and its “irresistible conclusion.” But Bartleby responds to another consideration. The lawyer’s arguments are sound—as both he and Bartleby agree—yet Bartleby, as so many critics have noted, is not a man of reason but a man of preferences. We can perhaps call these preferences “rhetoric,” but if they are marked textually as rhetorical, they are also specifically figural, for Bartleby’s relationship to Cicero is established through the plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero that sits in the lawyer’s office. The text thus defines Bartleby’s preferences as rhetorical through a figure—the metaphoric relationship of Bartleby to Cicero—but also renders rhetoric itself through a figure: the bust of Cicero metonymically figures rhetoric, even as it synecdochically figures Cicero himself. If Bartleby is a man of preferences, he is, consequently, a man of figures.

Recalling Bartleby’s first appearance at the door of the law office, the lawyer exclaims: “I can see that figure now—pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn!” (19). Bartleby enters the narrative as a figure, and while the lawyer’s choice of words might be accidental, the

description sticks, becoming more pronounced as the text progresses, resulting in Bartleby's transformation into what Marvin Hunt calls "a pure semiological event":

[T]he remarkably swift devolution from functioning scrivener to starved corpse represents a shift of value from the factual to the symbolic, from Bartleby as flesh-and-blood reference to Bartleby as verbal sign. Starvation is the final stage of a progressive dematerialization that reduces all things to language.¹⁰

While Hunt rightly points to the semiological in the figure of Bartleby, this movement is not accompanied by any simple progression from Bartleby as "flesh-and-blood reference" to Bartleby as "verbal sign." For Bartleby never simply dematerializes; he remains always somewhere between the material and the immaterial. He is a ghost who haunts, but one who can still be imprisoned by the law. He is a corpse that will not eat even as corpses cannot eat. That is, while Bartleby the figure might certainly be thought of only as a verbal sign, Bartleby the amalgam of apparition and gentlemanly cadaver always retains his physical self, however tenuously. What must be made sense of is Bartleby as both a figure and the apparition of the gentlemanly cadaver.

While these strange goings-on might seem at first to show the limits of a Marxist reading of "Bartleby," I take them as provocation for a return to Marx, in search of a subtler understanding of his concept of alienation than those suggested so far by critics of the story. I return to Marx not only because the critical history of "Bartleby" places these two texts into conversation but also because *Capital* too is rife with apparitions and specters. Marx's portrait of capitalism is as strangely haunted as "#__ Wall Street." Returning to *Capital* can help us make sense of Bartleby the worker through Bartleby the apparition of a gentlemanly cadaver, a relationship we can begin to see by attending to the role of the figural in Marx's analysis of value.

"A Story of Wall Street"

Reading "Bartleby" as the story of an apparition leads me to read *Capital* as another weird tale, another story of an apparition, a reading that begins with a linguistic coincidence. Just as Melville's story opens with the appearance of Bartleby at "#__ Wall Street," *Capital* opens with the appearance of the commodity. Neither Bartleby nor the com-

modity proves to be what it seems at first. Early in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx states: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities.’”¹¹ Marx’s use of *appears* is quite deliberate. His point is that the commodity is more than just a simple, sensuous thing (thus more than it appears) and, further, that this “more” is something that can be described only with a rhetoric of appearance. For Marx, the commodity is thus more than a “plain, homely” use-value. Marx’s insistence on the appearance of the commodity gestures toward the history of abstraction and reincorporation that is not physically visible within or on the commodity (except perhaps in the form of a price tag), but which constitutes it as such.

My analysis of the apparition of the commodity is routed first through Marx’s explanation of value, which begins with what he calls the accidental form of value. His analysis could be summarized in the statement “*linen = coat*,” for that is “the basis of the equation.” His task is to explain the process that makes the statement “*linen = coat*” not only possible but also sensical: how can linen and the coat be simultaneously different (linen and coat) and equal (C, 141, 138)? The answer lies in abstraction from use-values, which allows the linen and the coat to be related qualitatively (as abstract labor time, they become qualitatively the same) and thus quantitatively (hence moving from *linen = coat* to *20 yards of linen = 1 coat*).¹² In Marx’s formulation, value is thus always an abstraction of the particular qualities of use-values.

But Marx does not stop at abstraction: “The value of the commodity linen is therefore expressed by the physical body of the commodity coat, the value of one by the use-value of the other.” Even as value is necessarily an abstraction from use-value, it must still have a body—the use-value of the equivalent form, or exchange-value. “[I]n other words,” writes Marx, “the physical body of commodity B [the coat] becomes a mirror for the value of commodity A [the linen]” (C, 143, 144). Because exchange-value comes to represent the value of other use-values, it enables an alienation: the representation of linen’s value in an object that is not linen at all. Marx establishes here that value is a category with no physical reality; it is a pure abstraction. His critical move is to insist upon value’s reincorporation, its becoming physical again after abstraction.¹³ Thus, the value of linen comes to be represented not by some abstract, intangible idea but by the *body* of the

coat.¹⁴ The coat as use-value that serves as the mirror for the value of linen is thus not exactly the coat with which we began—it is a coat we have returned to after abstraction—hence, its “phantom-like objectivity.” The coat is, Marx asserts in a deliberate paradox, something “sensuous” but is “at the same time suprasensible or social” (C, 128, 165). Neither solely a physical object nor solely an abstraction, it is something entirely different.

In arguing that the “physical body of commodity B becomes a mirror for the value of commodity A,” Marx insists on the *specular* nature of value. Yet while he insists that in this specular relation the linen and the coat are “as like as two peas,” he just as insistently reminds us that the relationship springs up precisely because the linen and the coat are not as like as two peas (C, 144). The linen must see itself in the coat despite the fact that they are different things. In order for this relation of equivalence to be established, exchange must be understood as, in Thomas Keenan’s words, “a matter of signification, expression, substitution, and hence something that must be read.”¹⁵ If this mirror is reflecting, it must be reflecting something other than a physical existence. The linen and the coat can only be mirror images of one another after they have been abstracted from their physical forms and reduced to a common substance. Yet this commonality, while it most certainly exists, is not a visible quality—for value is “a purely verbal ‘like.’”¹⁶ Thus, the relations of equivalence proffered in exchange are figural because value necessarily puts things into metaphoric, and thus substitutable, relationships. Value itself functions as a process of figuration; it is what Werner Hamacher calls the “metaphor of a general substance, of labor.”¹⁷

In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida extends the discussion of figuration at the heart of the value form by making reference to the “*revenant*” or specter. Both spirit and body—or something in between the two—the specter, described by Derrida as a “proper body without flesh,” corresponds in Marx’s analysis to exchange-value.¹⁸ Derrida’s analysis of the logic of the “*sensuous non-sensuous*” (his formulation of Marx’s suggestion that exchange-value is both sensuous and suprasensible) lays out the structure of exchange-value, in particular, its salient differences from use-value.¹⁹ While exchange-value, as the physical form of value, comes to look much like use-value, it is spectral because it must always retain a trace of its journey through abstraction—of its bodiless existence as value. It is spectral because it is both

spirit and body, neither one nor the other but some combination of the two: “sensuous non-sensuous.” If value is an act of figuration, then exchange-value becomes the figure that gives that process a recognizable, “physical” form, but that physical form is a monstrous amalgam of body and spirit, both material and immaterial.

This reading of Marx’s theory of value as a theory of figuration thus enables a Marxist understanding of “Bartleby” that avoids the pitfalls of the first wave of such interpretations because it allows us to see the relationship between the eeriness of Bartleby and the story’s portrayal of the everyday. The figure of Bartleby, that amalgam of spirit and body, apparition and gentlemanly cadaver, suggests that a Marxist reading of “Bartleby” must not simply account for a worker’s resistance but must attend as well to the spectrality of capitalism, its complex intertwining of the material and the immaterial. Such a reading will allow us to see in “Bartleby” a critique not only of dehumanizing labor but of capitalism more broadly.

“I Would Prefer Not To”

Bartleby’s critique of labor and capitalism is registered through his varied refusals. Of course Bartleby refuses to do his job as a copyist, but his refusals go far beyond that, taken to their most extreme in his refusal to eat. While haunting the office, Bartleby lives only on ginger nuts. By the end of the story, when Bartleby has been imprisoned in the prophetically named Tombs, the grub-man asks of the lawyer: “‘His dinner is ready. Won’t he dine to-day, either? Or does he live without dining?’ ‘Lives without dining,’ said [the lawyer], and closed the eyes” (45). Gillian Brown diagnoses Bartleby’s refusal to eat as anorexia, which she suggests is a “radical refusal to partake of, and participate in, the world,” concluding that “anorexia secures the agoraphobic division of self from world, home from market.” Brown ultimately reads Bartleby’s behavior as “a repudiation of the marketplace and an expression of self-control.”²⁰

In pointing to the substance of Bartleby’s refusal to eat, Brown also implicitly points to the substance of each of his refusals: they are refusals of circulation. After Bartleby has stopped working altogether, the lawyer tries to remove him from his premises. Implementing his doctrine of assumptions, the lawyer leaves Bartleby his remaining wages and, unexpectedly, an “odd twenty” to ensure that Bartleby is

not “entirely” destitute (33).²¹ When Bartleby refuses to take the bait, the lawyer responds:

“I am seriously displeased. I am pained, Bartleby. I had thought better of you. I had imagined you of such a gentlemanly organization, that in any delicate dilemma a slight hint would suffice—in short, an assumption. But it appears I am deceived. Why,” I added, unaffectedly starting, “you have not even touched that money yet,” pointing to it, just where I had left it the evening previous. (35)

Bartleby thus becomes a particularly troubling puzzle to the lawyer; he seems to want nothing to do with the money at all, even though the wages are rightfully his. But Bartleby’s puzzling behavior does not end there, for just as he refuses to take the money, he also refuses to leave the building:

He answered nothing.

“Will you, or will you not, quit me?” I now demanded in a sudden passion, advancing close to him.

“I would prefer *not* to quit you,” he replied, gently emphasizing the *not*. (35)

While a cursory reading might suggest that the lawyer is requesting that Bartleby quit his job, he has, in fact, asked Bartleby to leave the office (asking him to quit his job being a redundancy since he does no work). Bartleby’s refusal is a refusal to quit, that is, to leave. It is, further, a refusal to accept his wages. He will not quit the office nor will he quit—settle accounts—with the lawyer. Bartleby thus refuses to work, to eat, to leave, and even to handle money, and with each refusal he maintains his motionless, emotionless manner, as if refusing as well both movement and affect.²² Bartleby, in short, refuses every form of circulation in which he is pushed to participate, and his incredible stillness is both part and product of these repeated refusals.

Bartleby’s string of refusals is catalyzed by a very specific demand of his job. As a scrivener, Bartleby’s job is to reproduce faithfully the documents entrusted to him and, once those documents are copied, to ensure their accuracy. At the outset of the story, Bartleby does at least part of his job very well: he is a voracious copier. What he prefers not to do, however, is check his own copy or any copy at all. John Carlos Rowe suggests that Bartleby refuses this task because he understands the impossibility of fulfilling the lawyer’s demand. For the lawyer,

“[a]ll the copies produced in his offices may be reduced to a single purpose that does not change. . . . Every legal document is part of an ideal representational system.”²³ In short, the lawyer believes in the idea of an accurate copy. Bartleby, however, seems to think that this “ideal representational system” is a dream, or at least it is not something for which he will vouch. He will produce copies, but he refuses to verify their substitutability for the original.

What Bartleby first prefers not to do, then, is certify relations of equivalence.²⁴ Indeed, a refusal of circulation is necessarily a refusal of equivalence, for as Marx illustrates through the expanded form of value, circulation is predicated on the infinite substitutability of one commodity for another: “‘There can be no exchange without equality.’”²⁵ In resisting circulation, what Bartleby avoids are these relationships of equality. Thus, we should not understand Bartleby as an alienated worker unless we understand alienation itself as his complaint. Alienation is the representation of one thing’s value in something else, which is possible only if these two things can be equated and thus substituted; Bartleby’s desire to escape these relations of equivalence, though never overtly declared, is evident in the common core of his various refusals.²⁶

It is Bartleby’s attempt to break out of these circuits of exchange, to disrupt circulation, that brings me back to the figure of Bartleby, the apparition of the gentlemanly cadaver. Here we can see the stakes of a reading of Marx’s theory of value as a theory of figuration. Bartleby is rendered as a figure precisely because of and through his refusal to acquiesce to the equivalent relationships at the heart of circulation, for the figural registers the tropic work necessary to produce the appearance of equivalence. The specters that haunt *Capital* and “#__ Wall Street” are the eerie reminders of all that must be effaced to establish abstract equivalence; they are the “sensuous-nonsensuous” remnants of the production of equivalence through abstraction and reincorporation.

The figure of Bartleby thus disrupts what Marx calls the *warensprache*, the language of the commodity. The *warensprache* is a simple language, for it is “restricted to a grammatical-syntactic minimum in which only propositions of equality can be formed.”²⁷ Commodity-language thus has but one representation: the equal sign. *Linen* = *coat* because the two items have been abstracted from sensible things into the suprasensible; they can be equated only because they have

been reduced to their lowest common denominator: abstract labor time. The linen and the coat can be so resolutely equated because of the relentless movement of the logic of capital to homogenize the heterogeneous—to produce relations of equivalence.²⁸ This is precisely the rub of capitalism. Because workers sell their labor power, and not themselves, to the capitalist, the relationship between capitalist and worker is, on its face, a fair one. Marx forcefully asserts that the worker and the capitalist “exchange equivalent for equivalent” (C, 280).²⁹ Marx’s “rhetoric of appearance” thus attempts to reveal the injustice of transactions even as they appear, in a capitalist context and logic, to be wholly fair and just. By refusing relations of equivalence, and thereby implying that these equal exchanges are, in fact, unequal, *Bartleby* denaturalizes these seemingly smooth operations of circulation.

While *Bartleby*’s refusals foreground the spectral at work in the mundane, they are not aimed solely at revealing the disequivalence at work in capitalism, for *Bartleby* is quite intent on another, related goal: to get out of circulation entirely. Yet if *Bartleby*’s resistance cuts through the logic of capital, *Bartleby* can never fully escape that logic. *Bartleby*’s desire to get out of circulation ultimately proves impossible, an impossibility shown even in his most direct (and most repeated) refusal: “I would prefer not to.” A deferral is embedded in the very grammar of the phrase. “I would prefer not to” is spoken in the conditional. *Bartleby* never states his preferences so much as states what they *would* be.³⁰ As a result, “I would prefer not to” becomes what Giorgio Agamben calls the “formula of potentiality.”³¹ We must surmise that *Bartleby* imagines this potentiality to be a space outside or beyond circulation. But if “I would prefer not to” expresses a formula of potentiality, it also simultaneously expresses its impossibility. The auxiliary verb “would” defers the action in the sentence, but it also constitutes the statement as a speculative-conditional one. As such, it necessarily implies the logic of the “if . . . then” statement: if such conditions existed, I would prefer X. Such conditional statements indicate specifically those things that are improbable or contrary to fact. Thus, while the conditional allows *Bartleby* to resist circulation on a grammatical level (through the deferral embedded in the phrase), it simultaneously marks the near impossibility of that resistance.³²

There is no stronger illustration of this impossibility than *Bartleby*’s ultimate fate. *Bartleby*’s attempt to escape circulation and the rela-

tions of equivalence it implies results in his forced inclusion, guaranteed by the secure walls of the Tombs. While it would seem that Bartleby’s imprisonment is a kind of fulfilled wish (prisons are designed precisely to prevent the circulation of criminals in the general populace), he clearly does not read it in this manner, for when the lawyer comes to see him, Bartleby greets him with an “implied suspicion”: “‘I know you,’ he said, without looking round, — ‘and I want nothing to say to you’” (43). While the penal system may offer what at first appears to be a form of noncirculation, it emerges here as a means of enforcing adherence to the other forms of circulation that Bartleby resists.

The apparent noncirculation in the Tombs, then, should not be misread as the fulfillment of Bartleby’s preferences. Indeed, Bartleby’s physical imprisonment comes with a fair amount of freedom, for the prison staff “had permitted him freely to wander about the prison, and especially in the inclosed grass-platted yards thereof” (43). Yet even in the relative freedom of this prison, Bartleby chooses again his own version of noncirculation. Rather than walking around the open grass, he turns “his face towards a high wall,” in the posture, now so familiar, that he often kept in the offices on Wall Street (43). Bartleby’s commitment to his preferences ultimately proves fatal: he dies (presumably of starvation) facing the high prison wall. Crucially, it is not the force of law that kills Bartleby (he would certainly have survived his sentence in the Tombs, particularly after the lawyer bribes the grub-man); it is his own continued commitment to refuse circulation.

We can, in this light, begin to understand the meaning of the Dead Letter Office. “Bartleby” ends with “one little item of rumor” offered by the lawyer to readers who have a remaining and pressing “curiosity as to who Bartleby was, and what manner of life he led prior to the present narrator’s making his acquaintance” (45). Bartleby “had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington” where letters that have not reached their destination are burned (45). The Dead Letter Office seems to be punishment for those missives that can not be delivered. The logic of the Dead Letter Office insists that those letters that have failed to circulate properly must be destroyed, that is, they must cease to be letters at all. As the lawyer, in a rare moment of perceptiveness, exclaims: “Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?” (45). Bartleby’s sad fate is another lesson in capitalism, one Bartleby himself never learns. If the seemingly equal exchanges of circulation conceal injustices, we cannot respond to these injustices by

attempting to get out of circulation. Bartleby's fate makes his critique of circulation all the more pressing, for the story reminds us that a response to the capitalist logic of the lawyer lies not beyond circulation but within it.

"A Rounded and Orbicular Sound"

While we can clearly discern a sense of Bartleby's preferences by looking at his refusals and his ultimate fate, everything we learn about Bartleby comes through the narration of the lawyer. Writing the narrative some years after Bartleby's death, the lawyer is still confused by his strange scrivener and pens his narrative in yet another attempt to make sense of him. In the end, the lawyer will fail spectacularly to understand his scrivener, but this failure itself will help to clarify both Bartleby and "Bartleby."

If ultimately the lawyer cannot understand Bartleby, he must be credited with the attempt; in fact, he puts up with a great deal of Bartleby's preferences before leaving him to the punishment of the authorities. He gives Bartleby a prized place in the office; he continues to pay Bartleby for a time even though he does no work; he offers on more than one occasion to help get Bartleby a new job. It cannot be denied that Bartleby has an effect, and a significant one, on the lawyer, and there are moments when the lawyer even seems dimly to understand his strange scrivener.

Musing on his "doctrine of assumptions," the lawyer begins to realize that Bartleby feels no obligation to it:

The more I thought over my procedure, the more I was charmed with it. Nevertheless, next morning, upon awakening, I had my doubts. . . . It was truly a beautiful thought to have assumed Bartleby's departure; but, after all, that assumption was 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 (34).

Even as the lawyer tries hard not to let Bartleby shake him, his confidence in his "doctrine of assumptions" ultimately gives way to a resigned conclusion that his assumptions are simply his own. "It was hardly possible," the lawyer reasons, "that Bartleby could withstand such an application of the doctrine of assumptions. But upon second

thoughts the success of the plan seemed rather dubious" (35). Bartleby's preferences have made their way into the lawyer's psyche to the degree that he finds "[he] had got into the way of involuntarily using this word 'prefer' upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions" (31). Despite his own best efforts, the lawyer himself is becoming a man of preferences.

It is not such a surprise that the lawyer finds himself beginning to understand, and even emulate, Bartleby. During Bartleby's employment at the law office, part of the lawyer's income comes from his position as a Master of Chancery. Chancery courts dealt not with questions of law but of equity, of "[j]ustice administered according to fairness as contrasted with the strictly formulated rules of common law." Guided by principles of equity, Chancery judges ruled "based on what was fair in a particular situation" rather than on the more regulated legal code.³³ The difference between the two courts can be understood as the difference between equality and equity. The law promises equality. Its claim to justice comes from the fact that it "tends to group similar and dissimilar elements together, to decide like and unlike cases by a single standard."³⁴ Equity, in contrast, involves deciding each case based on its individual circumstances and peculiarities. As a Master of Chancery, then, the lawyer must have some special skill in understanding the uniqueness of a situation. The skills necessary to be a Master of Chancery include the ability to imagine people, events, and concepts in relationships other than simple equality, for it is precisely to remedy the doctrine of sameness under the law that Courts of Equity emerge.³⁵

While the lawyer is a Master of Chancery during his interactions with Bartleby, he tells us at the time of the narrative that the "good old office" is "now extinct in the State of New-York" (14).³⁶ The lawyer's narrative is thus symbolically situated in a space not of equity but of equality. The closing of the Chancery courts prefigures the lawyer's ultimate approach to understanding Bartleby, best represented by his closing salvo: "Ah Bartleby! Ah Humanity!" (45). While Bartleby may begin the text as "a scrivener the strangest [the lawyer] ever saw or heard of," by the end of the text the lawyer, with apparent ease, places Bartleby in a simple synecdochal relationship with humanity at large (13). This relationship suggests that for all his attempts to understand and to come to terms with Bartleby in his strangeness, finally the lawyer can make sense of him only through the logic of the law

rather than the logic of equity. The final line is the lawyer's ultimate attempt to account for Bartleby, to bring Bartleby into circuits of meaning that are legible and comfortable to him. Bartleby is transformed into a representative for each of us, his story rendered as a lesson for one and all.³⁷

Why is it that the lawyer can finally see in Bartleby not the strange apparition haunting his office but only a representative of and for humanity? To find an answer to this question, I turn to the lawyer's introduction of himself to his readers, for it is in the lawyer's attempt to establish his credibility as a narrator that the root of his inability to understand Bartleby can be unearthed. He boasts that "[a]ll who know me, consider me an eminently *safe* man," suggesting that we too, as readers, should consider him safe and, as a consequence, trust that his narrative does not err or exaggerate. Offered as evidence of this statement is the testimony of John Jacob Astor, who confirms that the lawyer is prudent and methodical. But tellingly, the mention of John Jacob Astor disrupts the lawyer's composed narrative about himself, for he pauses inexplicably to ruminate on the name 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" (14).

In this rumination, the lawyer asserts a connection between the name John Jacob Astor and the condition of precious metals prior to their coining. The bullion to which the lawyer refers must be either gold or silver, the two metals used for coin at the time. It seems more probable that he implies gold, however, considering the obvious resonances between John Jacob Astor, the richest man in the United States at the time, and the idea of a gold standard, a standard of value by which to judge all others. In his comparison of John Jacob Astor to bullion, the lawyer seems to want to collapse the two lives of gold—as a precious metal and as money—for bullion is a liminal substance between gold as gold (as a commodity among other commodities) and gold as money. Bullion is, peculiarly, no longer only gold, earmarked as it is for coining, nor is it yet coin, having not yet borne the imprint or inscription that will transform it from a commodity into money.³⁸ Yet the lawyer's own construction seems intent on fixing the identity of bullion, for he asserts not only that the name John Jacob Astor "rings like unto bullion" but also that it has a "rounded and orbicular" sound. The lawyer thinks of language as a kind of money—specifically, he thinks of words as coins, for he speaks of the sound of Astor's name in figurative language that conjures up an image of coinage. The figure

is strange and complex, mixing the aural and the visual, for John Jacob Astor’s name sounds the way coins look (and the way bullion certainly does not). The lawyer’s collapsing of bullion into coin is evinced in the very structure of the sentence: the oblique reference to coin precedes the reference to bullion. “John Jacob Astor” has “a rounded and orbicular sound” before it is even compared to bullion. For the lawyer, then, the relationship of bullion to coin can be assumed, even as, for the reader, that relationship must work through a different logical progression—we do not read the “rounded and orbicular sound” as coin except insofar as we re-read it. Only when returning to the phrase after reading the bullion simile does the imagery become clear. This is, perhaps, a modified form of the very doctrine of assumptions so often associated with the lawyer. Debating whether Bartleby will have left the office after being instructed to do so, the lawyer asserts: “Yes, as before I had prospectively assumed that Bartleby would depart, so now I might retrospectively assume that departed he was” (35). For the lawyer, there is absolutely no possibility for disconnection in his logic: I assumed that he will depart and thus I can assume that he has departed. Foresight seamlessly becomes hindsight, and assumptions can be taken as facts. Just as the lawyer rhetorically erases the gap between assumption and fact—or between copy and original—so too he erases the gap between bullion and coin.

What the lawyer does not see, of course, is that bullion is not yet money precisely because it has not yet been coined. It does not yet bear the symbolic imprint of the State (traditionally a visual depiction of the sovereign) that guarantees its value. The lawyer imagines either that he does not need any symbol to transform bullion into coin or that there is no possibility for error in the transformation of bullion into coin, believing, as he does, in a kind of teleological fallacy wherein bullion is always already coin. In so doing, the lawyer elides the specifically figural genesis of money.³⁹ The lawyer has been mesmerized by this “dazzling money-form” and thus misunderstands the genealogy of money or, rather, refuses to admit that money has a genealogy at all (C, 139). When the lawyer asserts that bullion is coin, he short-circuits the very processes of figuration that enable bullion to *become* coin.⁴⁰

Bartleby is thus unreadable to the lawyer precisely because he, too, is a figure. For the lawyer, Bartleby will always be the “unaccountable Bartleby”: the lawyer’s system of reasoning cannot *account* for him, cannot insert him into a system of economic calculation (37). Bartleby does not and cannot make sense within the lawyer’s system of rea-

soning because the lawyer can speak only the warena sprache, which denies, even as it relies on, the figural. Bartleby is ultimately so troubling to the lawyer because he suggests that the lawyer's logic—the logic of capitalism—is not as consistent and seamless as it appears.⁴¹ As in Marx's *Capital*, the specter embodies the necessary figuration in the production of value, a figuration that must be effaced, but that can never fully be effaced. Thus, when the specter of Bartleby throws the lawyer's logic into crisis by refusing to be accounted for, the lawyer resorts to his own act of figuration, which functions only to reinstitute the warena sprache through abstract equivalence: "Ah Bartleby! Ah Humanity!"

Postscript: "One Little Item of Rumor"

We should be cautious of the Dead Letter Office. The questionable genealogy of the story the lawyer tells in his postscript suggests that its meaning is up for grabs. And the lawyer makes the most of his opportunity. He seems to imagine in the Dead Letter Office not the charred remains of misdirected missives but wholly and completely legible objects that find, in the lawyer, perhaps not their intended reader but a reader nonetheless:

Sometimes from out of the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring:—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity:—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. (45)

In constructing a series of tragic scenarios of letters sent and never received, the lawyer inserts himself into this postal circuit of his own design. In his imagined Dead Letter Office, a dead letter never fully falls out of circulation; someone, in this case the lawyer himself, will intercept and make meaning of the waylaid missive. For the lawyer, these circuits of exchange may not operate as planned, but they will not break down. The lawyer cannot help but try to make these lost letters meaningful, just as he cannot help but try to make sense of Bartleby.

I want to close, however, by offering a different Dead Letter Office, where the letters really are dead, where the letters remain unread,

where their messages remain untransmitted. I want, that is, to work against the lawyer’s desire for legibility both of the letters and of Bartleby himself. Bartleby’s desire not to circulate extends to the sphere of interpretation, and the Dead Letter Office marks his desire to remain the “unaccountable” Bartleby, not to be brought into circuits of recognizable meaning. The desire, as it seems with all Bartleby’s desires, is an impossible one, an impossibility marked by the structure of the story itself, for we have Bartleby’s story only through the meaning-making efforts of the lawyer. (The predicament, of course, is only redoubled by my own, or any, reading of the text.) This desire for illegibility is another manifestation of Bartleby’s resistance to relations of equivalence, and it reminds us that we cannot easily or carelessly make Bartleby into a representative, for Bartleby is, to put it mildly, an unwilling delegate. We should be all the more cautious of making Bartleby a representative when we consider that the lawyer uses the Dead Letter Office to explain his strange scrivener once and for all as the ultimate representative: “Ah Bartleby! Ah Humanity!” This language of abstract equivalence transforms Bartleby’s strangeness into the commonplace; it obscures the fact that Bartleby is a weird figure, and that “Bartleby” is a weird tale. The lawyer’s move is instructive, suggesting that it is precisely in making Bartleby into a representative of or for someone or something that we are in danger of losing his strangeness, and thereby of losing precisely what makes Bartleby, Bartleby.

While those readings of the story that see in the scrivener simply a representative of and for alienated workers surely have political aims at odds with the lawyer’s, they too sacrifice Bartleby’s strangeness by making him into a representative. In this respect, they recapitulate the lawyer’s attempts to return Bartleby to seamless circuits of equivalence and, as a result, remain unable to make sense of Bartleby himself. More broadly, this mode of reading unwittingly recapitulates the gestures of abstract equivalence used in the service of capital, and thus cannot help but be invested in the very same seamless logic that the lawyer holds so dear. Like the lawyer, this reading takes the process of abstraction as perfect, in which bullion is always already coin and the “weird” Bartleby can ultimately be recuperated back into “a portrait from life.”

Reading Marx’s theory of value as a theory of figuration allows us to retain, as much as possible, the eeriness of Bartleby, to avoid making

him into something he is not, for whatever political goals—to avoid, in other words, a kind of exploitation of representation. In this reading of Marx, a portrait of life under capitalism is necessarily also a weird tale, one in which we are constantly haunted by the specters of abstraction and incorporation, and things are never as they seem. And while *Bartleby* himself can never get out of circulation (except, of course, through death), the story testifies to the success, even if only partial, of his resistance. For if *Bartleby*'s aim is to disrupt the apparently smooth running of a logic of abstract equivalence, the story itself records and reenacts just such a disruption, giving us the story of how a strange scrivener turns the “snug retreat” of the lawyer upside down (14). If, then, we are to continue to think of “*Bartleby*” as a text in conversation with Marxism—as I think we should—we must begin to look inside the four claustrophobic walls of “#__ Wall Street” and see the specters that haunt it.

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Notes

I am deeply indebted to several people whose thoughtful comments on this essay greatly improved it: David Eng, Stephanie Foote, David Kazanjian, Rosalind Morris, and Joseph Valente. For his tireless commitment to seeing this essay through, I am particularly grateful to Zachary Lesser.

- 1 Herman Melville, “*Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*,” in *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*, vol. 9 of *The Writings of Herman Melville*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and the Newberry Library, 1987), 13; further references to “*Bartleby, the Scrivener*” are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically.
- 2 *Boston Evening Traveller*, 3 June 1856; *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, September 1836; both reprinted in *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 473, 482, respectively.
- 3 J. E. A. Smith, (*Pittsfield, Mass.*) *Berkshire County Eagle*, 30 May 1856; reprinted in *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Higgins and Parker, 472.
- 4 For other Marxist readings of the text, see Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), 132–45; and James C. Wilson, “‘*Bartleby*’: The Walls of Wall Street,” *Arizona Quarterly* 37 (winter 1981): 335–46.
- 5 Louise K. Barnett, “*Bartleby* as Alienated Worker,” *Studies in Short Fiction* 11 (fall 1974): 379.

- 6 Dan McCall, *The Silence of Bartleby* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989), 61–63, 110–13.
- 7 David Kuebrich, “Melville’s Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in ‘Bartleby,’” *New England Quarterly* 69 (September 1996): 381–84.
- 8 Barbara Foley, “From Wall Street to Astor Place: Historicizing Melville’s ‘Bartleby,’” *American Literature* 72 (March 2000): 88.
- 9 Sheila Post-Lauria, “Canonical Texts and Context: The Example of Herman Melville’s ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street,’” *College Literature* 20 (June 1993): 198.
- 10 Marvin Hunt, “‘That’s the Word’: Turning Tongues and Heads in ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener,’” *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 40 (fourth quarter, 1994): 278, 277.
- 11 Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), 125. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as *C*.
- 12 Diane Elson chastises theorists who see value as a theory of labor time, a construction in which value is determined by the amount of labor put into an individual object. Such a notion fails to attend to Marx’s insistence on value as a measure of *abstract* social labor. The value of a commodity is not determined by the individual labor manifested in the thing itself but by the amount of labor considered socially necessary to produce the commodity. Perhaps a weaver is able to produce linen in five hours, but the socially necessary labor time to produce the same amount is six hours. The weaver is thus more efficient than the standard. Yet when that linen goes on the market, it will sell at the six-hour price, not at the five-hour price. Marx’s point is that price is determined (though not guaranteed) by the abstract social labor time in the commodity, a figure determined in very small part by the particular labor in the commodity, insofar as it is itself labor and so factored into abstract labor. The correspondence between individual labor and price exists but is difficult to discern, giving rise to the idea that the system itself controls values, rather than the individual labor of the producers (“The Value Theory of Labour,” in *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*, ed. Diane Elson [London: CSE Books, 1979], 115–80).
- 13 Marx’s insistence on a form of value apart from value itself comes from Hegel. Jairus Banaji notes that in his *Science of Logic*, Hegel asserts that we must think of a thing as a combination of what he calls essence and form. “Precisely,” Hegel writes, “because *form is as essential to essence* as essence to itself, essence must not be grasped and expressed merely as essence . . . but as form also” (quoted in “From the Commodity to Capital: Hegel’s Dialectic in Marx’s *Capital*,” in *Value*, ed. Elson, 19). Hegel’s formulation suggests that essence understood without form “remains devoid of any form of appearance, hence something purely abstract and hypothetical.” Further, if essence is understood without form, there can

- be no bridge between form and essence, leaving “a world of appearances, divorced from any principle.” Hegel’s formulation thus allows one to conceptualize both a realm of abstraction and its relationship to the world of appearance, to the material (Banaji, “From the Commodity to Capital,” 21).
- 14 Once relations of equivalence are made in the abstract, they must then carry over into material reality. This material reality, however, cannot be mistaken for value. Value remains, resolutely, in the abstract. The material form, the “form of appearance” of value, is exchange-value. Value and exchange-value are therefore not synonyms, though exchange-value is determined by value. The process by which value is transformed into exchange-value is by no means easily determined. Called the “transformation problem,” it has long puzzled and motivated Marxist theorists of value (see Paul Sweezy, “Marxian Value Theory and Crises,” *The Value Controversy*, ed. Ian Steedman [London: Verso, 1981], 25).
 - 15 Thomas Keenan, “The Point Is to (Ex)Change It: Reading *Capital*, Rhetorically,” in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993), 174.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, 176.
 - 17 Werner Hamacher, “Lingua Amissa: The Messianism of Commodity-Language and Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*,” trans. Kelly Barry, in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s “Specters of Marx,”* ed. Michael Sprinker (New York: Verso, 1999), 171.
 - 18 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 7. For Derrida, the figure of the specter offers a critique of ontology by offering a somewhat tongue-in-cheek “hauntology.” The specter returns from where—the future? the past? We cannot be certain, and it is this uncertainty that implicitly critiques any notion of presence. Derrida critiques Marx in particular by suggesting that Marx believes the advent of communism will be a time when we shall be, as Aijaz Ahmad describes it, “free of all social contradictions, [when] the self shall fully coincide with itself, and being and consciousness shall be one and the same” (“Reconciling Derrida: ‘Specters of Marx’ and Deconstructive Politics,” in *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed. Sprinker, 94). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critiques Derrida’s reading of Marx, charging that Derrida attends only to the Marx before *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, before, that is, Marx had “discovered the secret of industrial capitalism: the creation of surplus value through labor-power as commodity.” She further suggests that Derrida portrays “a silly Marx, who thinks use is good and exchange bad, that use-value is ‘proper to man.’” Spivak suggests instead that Marx understood that the social *is* spectral—and that communism is not about propriety or a space without spectrality but about using the spectrality of the social to benefit all rather than a select few. “In capital’s subject,” Spivak explains, “[the ghostliness is] poison; for the social subject, medicine” (“Ghostwriting,” *Diacritics* 25 [summer 1995]: 72, 74, 75).

- 19 Derrida, *Specters*, 150.
- 20 Gillian Brown, "The Empire of Agoraphobia," *Representations* 20 (fall 1987): 147, 149. Brown also incisively links agoraphobia with the development of the market economy. Looking at psychological case histories from Melville's time, she notes a preponderance of instances in which growing technological advances, particularly in transportation and communication, are cited as the causes of agoraphobia. "In this context," she concludes, "agoraphobia, the anxiety and immobility occasioned by the space and scope of streets, by the appurtenances and avenues of traffic, is an anticommmercial condition—literally, fear of the marketplace" (136).
- 21 We should not take the lawyer's charity as pure generosity. He helps Bartleby, if not wholly then at least in part, because he imagines it to be a smart economic transaction: "If I turn him away, the chances are he will fall in with some less indulgent employer, and then he will be rudely treated, and perhaps driven forth miserably to starve. Yes. Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange willfulness, will cost me little or nothing" (23). The lawyer's charity is a profit-making enterprise: "delicious self-approval" for little or no cost.
- 22 Bartleby does have a "savings' bank" that the lawyer finds when rummaging through Bartleby's desk (28). Yet while the lawyer imagines this to be a savings bank, it seems probable that Bartleby would not characterize it in the same way. A savings bank implies the saving of money for future use. Since Bartleby stops using money altogether, it would seem that he has a collection of money only because he refuses to use it *as* money, not because he is saving it for future use. Strictly speaking, then, Bartleby's collection of coins is not a savings bank, if a savings bank is a way of saving money. Because Bartleby seems to have no intention of using the money, the coins have stopped being money (at least while Bartleby holds onto them), in the same way that collectible coins are not money for the collector, their having been withdrawn from circulation.
- 23 John Carlos Rowe, *Through the Custom-House: Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Modern Theory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982), 122. Rowe notes as well that the copying that the lawyer asks Bartleby to do "substitutes a writing of pure repetition in order to control the subversive movement of signification that relies on the absence of a signified and thus denies any pure mastery or original authority" (122).
- 24 It is telling, then, that the grub-man in the Tombs confesses to the lawyer: "Well now, upon my word, I thought that friend of yours was a gentleman forger; they are always pale and genteel-like, them forgers" (44). In some sense, Bartleby is a forger, at least when evaluated by the logic of the lawyer. If Bartleby produces copies that are meant to be perfect substitutes for originals (an ideal copy is not recognizable as such) but refuses to verify their authenticity, perhaps he is guilty of a kind of forgery, of attempting to pass off "bad" copies as "good" ones, or, certain to be even

- more troubling to the lawyer, of refusing to recognize any difference between the two.
- 25 Aristotle, quoted in Marx, *Capital*, 151.
- 26 Indeed, we cannot understand Bartleby's refusal as a refusal simply of work, for when the lawyer offers to find Bartleby other employment, Bartleby rejects his ideas not on the grounds that he does not want to work but, rather, that the work the lawyer proposes is unsuitable to him. When asked if he would like to be a bartender, Bartleby replies: "I would not like it at all; though, as I said before, I am not particular." Asked by the lawyer about being a bill collector, he hones his objection: "No, I would prefer to be doing something else" (41). Bartleby's resistance is thus not a resistance to work per se—for he would prefer to do "something else," a something that is, presumably, work—but a resistance, if we can take his other refusals as evidence, to entering into the economy, into circulation.
- 27 Hamacher, "Lingua Amissa," 170.
- 28 As Gayatri Spivak notes, "Money conceals the heterogeneity of social relations irretrievably by substituting the category of (mis)-substitution for (necessarily asymmetrical) exchange" ("Marx after Derrida," in *Philosophical Approaches to Literature: New Essays on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Texts*, ed. William E. Cain [Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1984], 231-32).
- 29 In Spivak's reading of *Capital* and of Marx more generally, she suggests that the disequivalence at the heart of capitalism is predicated on the superadequation of laborers to themselves. The fact that laborers can produce more value than they consume is the basis for surplus and thus profit ("Marx after Derrida," 240-41).
- 30 This grammatical construction is ideal for Bartleby, as it allows him to refuse without refusing, to act without acting; his preferences are themselves refusals of any form of action. There are several moments in the text when Bartleby alters his phrase, uttering "I prefer not" instead. He uses this modified phrase only when pushed by the lawyer to answer in some language other than preference. Bartleby thus drops the "would" in order to placate the lawyer, suggesting that "would" indeed functions to make Bartleby's response as inactive as possible.
- 31 Giorgio Agamben, "Bartleby, or On Contingency," *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press), 255. Agamben analyzes Bartleby's preferences in opposition to the philosophical tradition of will. The lawyer, after Bartleby refuses to go to the post office, asks him: "You *will* not?" Bartleby, however, refuses not only the request but also the grammatical construction: "I *prefer* not," he replies (25). Agamben suggests that Bartleby's refusal of the verb *will* "calls into question precisely this supremacy of the will over potentiality" (254). In preferring rather than willing, Bartleby remains wholly outside the logic of the lawyer, so much so that

Agamben suggests that Bartleby’s potentiality “creates its own ontology” (259). Such a reading, while persuasive in some respects, is ultimately at odds with mine. While perhaps Bartleby imagines he will exist in a state of pure potentiality, this desire is proven by the text to be a fantasy.

- 32 “I would prefer not to” undoes Bartleby’s preferences in another way as well. As Ann Smock notes, “[I]f *to prefer* means to incline toward one thing rather than another . . . it also means to pay one among a number of creditors before, or even to the exclusion of, all others. *Preference* means the act of so quitting a particular debt first, or the right to receive what is owed you before any other creditor does” (“Quiet,” *Qui Parle* 2 [fall 1988]: 71). The OED gives a definition of *to prefer*, in addition to its more commonplace one, as “To give preference to as a creditor” (7b), a definition in working use in England until at least 1885. This double meaning of “to prefer” means that at those moments when Bartleby fashions himself as most outside circuits of exchange he is also squarely within them. Smock points specifically to Nipper’s use of the term to illustrate this usage in the text: “Nippers exclaims . . . ‘I’d prefer *him* [Bartleby]! I’d give him *his* preferences!’ Nippers would pay Bartleby, straight away, everything he has coming to him” (“Quiet,” 71).
- 33 *Black’s Law Dictionary*, 5th ed. (1979), s.v. “Equity.” A Master of Chancery serves as an investigator for such cases, helping the judge of the court render fair decisions based on the facts the Master uncovers. The investigatory aspect of the lawyer’s role as Master of Chancery can be read back onto the story itself. The lawyer throughout the story investigates Bartleby; the text is the “report” of his investigations.
- 34 Joseph Valente, *James Joyce and the Problem of Justice: Negotiating Sexual and Colonial Difference* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 2. Valente convincingly argues that justice should be understood as the perpetual oscillation between the law and equity, which he discusses as a difference between equity under the law and equity of the law (1–48).
- 35 *Black’s Law Dictionary* states that the object of courts of equity is “to render the administration of justice more complete, by affording relief where the courts of law are incompetent to give it, or to give it with effect, or by exercising certain branches of jurisdiction independently of them” (s.v. “Equity”).
- 36 Barbara Foley notes that the Chancery courts were abolished in 1846 when the New York state constitution was revised. They closed the following year when the new constitution went into effect (“From Wall Street to Astor Place,” 89).
- 37 For it to be legible in some way, the story of Bartleby must be a story told by the lawyer, for Bartleby’s continued attempts to withdraw himself from multiple economies mean that he must also withdraw from the linguistic one. He cannot narrate his own preferences in order to remain faithful to them. When pressed by the lawyer to detail what he would

- like to do if not copying, Bartleby is unable to articulate any alternative desires—indeed, his desire is illegible insofar as it is a desire to exist outside the common systems of circulation, which include language.
- 38 Barbara Foley suggests, based on historical references in the text, that the action of “Bartleby” must have taken place in New York City in the 1840s (“From Wall Street to Astor Place”). According to Margaret G. Myers, in the 1840s the currency was composed “largely of bank notes so subject to depreciation that no merchant could safely accept them before consulting his ‘Banknote Detector’ to determine their probable value.” After the collapse of the Second Bank of the United States, there was no central authority that issued currency; so each state bank issued its own. In 1847, Congress passed a bill mandating that government officers accept only gold and silver coin as part of an attempt by “hard-money” Democrats to ensure that the currency of the nation did not become wholly paper. Clearly, the lawyer was not alone in his belief in gold (*Financial History of the United States* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1970], 121, 131–34).
- 39 With money, as Marx points out, the specter of exchange-value develops into a further spectralized form and is “replaced by a symbol of itself.” Whereas exchange-value hides a history of abstraction, we can speak of money as figural in that it hides its own history as a body, as a material commodity like any other (*Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus [New York: Penguin, 1993], 144).
- 40 The lawyer thus engages in a kind of revisionist history similar to the approach of metaphysical philosophers to language that Derrida critiques in “White Mythology.” Derrida compares the erosion of philosophical language to the erosion of the imprint on a coin, a process that allows the figuration inherent in philosophical language to be “no longer noticed.” Metaphorical meaning is then taken for “proper meaning,” through a deliberate forgetting that allows one to think of language (or economic value) “not as a displacement with breaks, as reinscriptions in a heterogeneous system, mutations, separations without origin” but as a continuous system (in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982], 211, 215). The lawyer’s logic can only function within a belief in such a continuous system, for only if this system is continuous can he regularly elide it: bullion *is* coin.
- 41 Such a charge would be particularly troubling to the lawyer, convinced as he is of his fairness. The lawyer is so committed to his own self-image as fair—and thus not exploitative—that he is quite bothered not only by Bartleby’s refusal to work but also by Bartleby as a voracious copier. The motionlessness of Bartleby—so pronounced as to be the first detail the lawyer notices—contrasts sharply with his performance on the job, for “[a]t first Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge him-

self on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light” (19). Bartleby is, strangely, both motionless and a voracious copier: a motionless, voracious copier. It is not that Bartleby is motionless only when not copying; rather, the lawyer complains of Bartleby’s work precisely through the qualities of his motion: “he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically” (20). Bartleby may have to move to copy, but he does so as little—and as inhumanly—as possible. In cataloging his dissatisfaction with Bartleby, the lawyer complains of Bartleby’s motionless copying on an emotional register: “I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious” (19–20). It is not that the lawyer feels that Bartleby is sullen rather than cheerful, angry rather than happy, but that he expresses no emotion whatsoever. Bartleby is as “unaffected” when he is a voracious copier as when he stops copying altogether. It is wholly plausible—in fact, probable—that on first encountering Bartleby, one would associate his endless copying and his lack of affect not with a resistant worker but with a kind of ideal—even if monstrous—one. Bartleby works tirelessly without any emotions that might distract him. In fact, Bartleby seems never to leave the office (he copies “a day and night line, copying by sun-light and candle-light”). And yet the lawyer finds this ideal worker unsettling, for through Bartleby-the-voracious-copier, the lawyer sees what he imagines to be the naturalness of capitalism pushed to its logical extreme, an extreme that reveals not the “Eden of the innate rights of man” that capitalism appears to be (C, 280) but a worker so single-minded and tireless that he has become almost inhuman.

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