

CHAPTER 4

A Parasitic Chain on Wall Street in “Bartleby”

Moving on to Melville’s work after *Moby-Dick*, already in *Pierre* it becomes obvious that when the author’s interests turned toward life on American soil, the parasite tagged along, easily accommodating itself to dry land—where, after all, free dinners are generally easier to obtain than they are at sea. In *Pierre*—which, according to Édouard Marsoin, “is a novel about various bodily practices, especially dietic ones, and their connections with philosophical attitudes” (“The Belly Philosophical” 1715)—there is for example something of the sponger in Reverend Falsgrave, whose manners are said to be “polished and unobtrusive, but peculiarly insinuating” (*P* 98), suggesting his spiritual kinship with such religious parasites as Molière’s *Tartuffe* and Dickens’ Mr. Chadband. The novel also indicates that the reason Falsgrave is unwilling to offer concrete advice to Pierre, is because he fears alienating his “untiring benefactress,” Mrs. Glendinning, “from whose purse, [Pierre] could not help suspecting, came a great part of his salary, nominally supplied by the rental of the pews” (*P* 97). Moreover, Pierre himself has also something of the sponger in him, as obvious from his idle, aristocratic life at Saddle-Meadows, as well as his initial plans to live off his cousin, Glen, in New York. The figure of the parasite is also relevant to many of the shorter stories Melville wrote in this period, including, as mentioned in Chapter 1, “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs” and “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids”. However, at present I will focus on the various parasitical relationships that play out in his undoubtedly most famous story, “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” before moving on to one of his least read stories, “Jimmy Rose,” in Chapter 5.

The former of the two, whose full title is “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street,” was published in two instalments in the November and December editions of *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine of American*

Literature, Science and Art in 1853, before being reprinted in *The Piazza Tales* in 1856. My primary reason for including it here, is that it offers what may well be the most puzzling parasitical relationship in all of Melville's writings. What becomes clear when the story is approached through the conceptual lens of the parasite, is that it is far from obvious whom is sponging on whom: Is the real parasite of the story the titular character, the frustrated lawyer-narrator who tries to make sense of his strange employee, or the very words that Bartleby repeatedly utters, in doing so spreading chaos around him: "I would prefer not to"? In the following, these candidates for the role of the story's ultimate parasite will be considered in turn.

Bartleby, the Anorexic Parasite

Set in New York sometime during the 1840s or the early 1850s, the story follows the retroactive attempts of the narrator—an unnamed, elderly lawyer—to come to terms with the life and death of Bartleby, whom he ends up hiring in order to compensate for the particularities of his other employees, as well as to cope with a heavier workload after being promoted.¹³⁶ In the beginning, the new scrivener works diligently, but on the third day, the problems start. When the narrator requests that Bartleby help him proof-read legal documents, his new employee simply tells him that he "would prefer not to" ("B" 20).

From here on, this sentence—or versions thereof—will be Bartleby's answer to most of the lawyer's utterances, be they questions, suggestions, orders, pleas, attempted bribes, or threats. Since the copyist never explicitly opposes him, the mild-mannered and kind-hearted narrator, who considers himself a man of "prudence" and "method" ("B" 14), feels incapable of taking decisive action. Finally, seeing no other way of getting rid of his polite foe, he decides to relocate, leaving Bartleby in the old office, where the new tenants finally have him arrested for vagrancy and put in

¹³⁶ As Barbara Foley has argued, due to contemporary events, a few years must have passed between the initial encounter between the lawyer and Bartleby (sometime between 1843 and 1847), and the act of narration (sometime between 1848 and 1853). According to her, Melville has mixed up the order of events so that "the story could not, strictly speaking, have taken place at all" (89).

jail. The lawyer still feels a strange sort of responsibility, but even though he bribes one of the jailers to make sure he is well fed, Bartleby prefers not to eat. In the end he dies, curled up in front of a brick wall.

The narrator adds a postscript to his story by disclosing the one piece of additional information he has managed to come across, namely that the scrivener had once been employed at the Dead Letter Office in Washington, but that he had been removed due to a change in the political administration. Even though he cannot vouchsafe for the truth of the story, for the lawyer, herein can be found a possible explanation for Bartleby's strange behavior: "Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames?" ("B" 45). The story then ends with the following paratactic exclamation: "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" ("B" 45).

How then should this strange story be understood? "Bartleby" seems to belong to that rare species of literary text where there is almost no limit to what scholars might make of the story, and as even a small sampling of its scholarly reception clearly indicates, the titular character has been interpreted in a truly impressive number of ways.¹³⁷ For this reason, it should perhaps not come as a surprise that several previous scholars have expressed the idea that the scrivener should be understood as a parasite of

137 Bartleby has for example been read as a corpse (Hoag); as a ghost (Reed); as Christ and a Hindu ascetic (Franklin, *The Wake* 126–36); as proto-slacker (Lutz 129–35); as suffering from a variety of diseases and/or ailments, including leprosy (Zlogar), schizophrenia (Beja), agoraphobia and anorexia (G. Brown), autism (Sullivan), Asperger syndrome (Koegel), catatonia (Osmond), dyspepsia (Savarese), acedia (Hildebrand, and Knighton), and lead poisoning (Bogin). He has also been read as the narrator's double (Marcus); as Melville himself and as a symbol of the artist under marketplace conditions (Chase, "A Parable", and L. Marx, "Melville's Parable"); as Melville's friend Eli Fly (Leyda 455); as patron saint of non-writing writers (Vila-Matas); as Henry David Thoreau (Oliver, "A Second Look"); as Nathaniel Hawthorne (Bickley Jr., "Minor"); as exploited worker (Barnett); as squatter (Barbara Foley, and Yablon, 107–45); as failed revolutionary (Emery, and Hardt and Negri 203–4); as offering a revolutionary path (Žižek 381–85); as idiot (Stengers, and Arsić, *Passive* 54–67); as the neutrality haunting life and thinking (J. H. Miller, *Versions* 141–78); as absolute potentiality, (Agamben, "Bartleby"); as, among a number of other things, "a beingless cloud" (Arsić, *Passive*). For more examples put forward by the so-called "Bartleby industry," see McCall, which also includes an overview of different critical suggestions for how to understand the narrator, ranging from Pontius Pilate to Charles Dickens, Edgar Allen Poe, and Melville's father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw.

sorts. To discuss whether this is a fitting description, I will start by looking at these earlier suggestions. First, here is what Frederic Rosenheim had to say, as part of a rather odd psychoanalytic reading from 1940:

The *parasitic creature* is actually described in the story, “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” Bartleby is an extraordinarily queer, reserved, isolated being who refuses to exert himself or make any of the efforts of an adult to procure a living. Like the infants, he must be fed unconditionally. When Bartleby is not fed, he starves to death. (9; emphasis added)

Five year later, Egbert S. Oliver went on to make the following claim about the scrivener:

His attitude toward life was a gradually progressive nonviolent noncooperation—even while he *attached himself as a parasite to his employer and benevolent guardian*. (This, the reader must be assured, is an inadequate and unfriendly summing-up of “Bartleby,” which will be modified before this essay is finished). (“A Second Look” 63; emphasis added)

Then, in 1962, Mordecai Marcus asserted that after Bartleby “refuses to work any longer, he *becomes a kind of parasite on the lawyer*, but the exact nature of his dependence on the lawyer remains mysteriously vague” (108; emphasis added), before Humphrey Osmond in 1971 explained the narrator’s decision to relocate to new offices as follows: “It appears that *this strange parasitic relationship* might have gone on indefinitely had not his fellow lawyers begun to question his keeping an eccentric scrivener in the office” (166; emphasis added).¹³⁸

What are we to make of these four quotes? First, none of the articles refers to any of the others, and it is therefore not unlikely that they arrived at the notion of Bartleby as parasite and the narrator as his host independently of each other. Second, they all invoke the parasite (Marcus and Oliver) or the parasitic (Rosenheim and Osmond) only briefly and

¹³⁸ In addition to these four, I will later touch upon the contributions from Vismann, and Little. While neither analyzes the question of parasitism in depth, they both offer valuable insights that can contribute to this task. Jean Fisher’s “Tricksters, Troubadours—and Bartleby” contains a reading of “Bartleby” and references to Serres’ work on the parasite, but without connecting the two. For an analysis that conceptualizes the narrator as a host and the scrivener not as a parasite, but as an unwanted guest, see Bigagli.

in passing, and—with the partial exception of Rosenheim—without attempting to explain their respective claims. This perhaps suggests that Bartleby's parasitic traits must have seemed so self-evident to the authors in question, that no further explanations were needed. However, with the exception of Rosenheim, whose article holds a highly negative view of the supposedly dependent and infantile Bartleby, the other scholars express an uneasiness with the label parasite, evident in formulations such as "kind of parasite" and "mysteriously vague" (Marcus), and "strange parasitic relationship" (Osmond), as well as Oliver's explanatory parenthesis. This indicates an awareness that the fit between the scrivener and the concept might not be perfect after all. Finally, it must be pointed out that all four write long after the biological concept of the parasite had become the standard one, and that none of them refer to the older meanings of the term. For this reason, what they are trying to convey is likely that the relationship between Bartleby and the lawyer in some ways resembles the extended relationship found in nature between biological parasites and their hosts, where the former feeds at the expense of the latter. As we saw in Chapter 2, even biologists have often evaluated such relationships in ethical terms, and it seems that this also holds for these four scholars. In labelling Bartleby a parasite or a parasitic creature, they are explicitly, in the case of Rosenheim, or more implicitly, in the case of the others, condemning him for a certain kind of unethical behavior.

There are certainly aspects of Melville's story that could be brought in as support for this conclusion. First, Bartleby undoubtedly receives a salary for work he to a large extent prefers not to do, in the end doing none. This non-preference for work is probably one of the most important reasons the four scholars found recourse to the image of the parasite: Bartleby's behavior indeed comes across as a blunt offense against the Protestant work ethic described by Max Weber as having evolved from religious thinkers like Luther and Calvin, who advocated the idea that labor must "be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling" (62).¹³⁹ The long historical processes that led people to internalize this

139 For a reading that focuses on Bartleby's idleness in relation to the Protestant work ethic from a different perspective, see Knighton.

view, helping reshape work from a necessary evil to a virtue, has been so effective that today—as was also the case in Melville’s day—not working is commonly held to be one of the most unethical things one can do.¹⁴⁰ This is especially the case in America, where, to quote Sacvan Bercovitch, the Protestant work ethic was granted “a special supernatural legitimacy” by the New England Puritans (xiii), which led to its deep embedding in American culture. In addition, the country was founded on a strong opposition to the aristocracy of the Old World and its idle ways.¹⁴¹ To Tom Lutz, the consequence has been that “work, in America, is not simply an opportunity; it is our personal responsibility, perhaps our prime moral imperative” (10). This moral imperative helps explain the vehement attacks often levelled at those deemed unproductive, lazy, and dependent on others for their survival—attacks that often make explicit use of the concept of the parasite to dehumanize one’s opponents, as we saw in the discussion of Ayn Rand in Chapter 2.

Second, since *Bartleby* seemingly never leaves the lawyer’s offices, at some point he goes from being an employee to an occupant. Over time, this understandably leads to the narrator’s increasing exasperation, culminating in the following outburst: “What earthly right have you to stay here? Do you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?” (“B” 35). Thus, the idea that *Bartleby* is exploiting the lawyer in a parasitic manner, likely has less to do with him receiving a salary he has not earned, than it has to do with his peculiar way of embedding himself within the narrator’s world—or creating a *habitat* for himself, so to speak. This is because the scrivener seems to have no interest in money, which is what causes all attempts to buy him off to fail—and, as a corollary, *Bartleby* can hardly be accused of taking advantage of his boss for economical reasons. In addition, his inhabiting the lawyer’s offices—particularly, him being strangely enfolded within the “high green folding

140 As Tom Lutz notes, “[i]n ancient Greek, Roman, and Middle Eastern civilizations, work was by and large considered a curse, accorded dignity only to the extent that it made possible the *vita contemplativa*, the higher life of the mind. Labor had no honor in and of itself, and certainly no entronement among the virtues” (14). From a Christian perspective, work was originally God’s punishment after Eve convinced Adam to eat the forbidden fruit: “cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life” (Gen. 3.17).

141 On American opposition to aristocracy, see Wilentz, and Fraser (11–53).

screen" that has been procured for him ("B" 19)—connects him to the definitions of the parasite as an entity living *in* or *on* other creatures offered by the, in the 1850s, nascent scientific field of parasitology.

Several references in the story take on new meaning when seen in this light. When the narrator thinks he has finally managed to solve his problem, simply by assuming that Bartleby will leave if told to, he is in an excellent mood: "I could not but highly plume myself on my masterly management in getting rid of Bartleby" ("B" 33). In this context, the verb *plume* means praising oneself in a self-congratulatory way, but it can also signify a bird preening its feathers to remove lice and other ectoparasites. The narrator thus seems to imply that Bartleby has somehow *attached* himself to him, and, in a similar vein, he later concludes that "it is quite plain he prefers to cling to you" ("B" 38)—almost as if he were talking about a parasitic plant or an ectoparasite. That such an entity cannot simply be left behind, if it has first gotten hold of you, becomes clear when, as a last resort, the lawyer takes the extraordinary step of relocating to the new offices. His description of his departure implies that a certain violence is needed: "I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of" ("B" 39).

But why is it that the narrator does not simply fire Bartleby as soon as he first "prefers not to" comply with his orders? While scholars have usually explained this by reference to his kindness, it should be pointed out that the scrivener is not the only character with parasitic traits working for the lawyer. In fact, there is something of the parasite in all three of his other employees—all whose names, fittingly, are sobriquets at least partially related to food or to eating.¹⁴² This is especially the case for his two other scriveners, Turkey and Nippers, who can both be said to be part-time parasites of sorts. While diligent until noon, the former regularly drinks too much during his lunch break. As a result, the rest of the day he is rash, hot-tempered and far too energetic for the narrator's liking. Nippers, on the other hand, strikes the lawyer as "the victim of two evil

142 As the narrator puts it regarding the names of his employees: "These may seem names, the like of which are not usually found in the Directory. In truth they were nicknames, mutually conferred upon each other by my three clerks, and were deemed expressive of their respective persons or characters" ("B" 15). For the argument that "Nippers" is most likely a reference to lobster claws, see Stein (29).

powers—ambition and indigestion” (“B” 16). Due to the second of these evil powers, he is irritable in the morning, but his mood improves after lunch. Hence, prior to hiring Bartleby, the lawyer is stuck with one scrivener who is productive in the morning and comparatively useless in the afternoon, and another where it is the other way around. Finally, there is the errand boy nicknamed Ginger Nut. While he undoubtedly makes a valuable contribution by supplying the scribes with the refreshments they require to do their “dry, husky sort of business” (“B” 18), he does not seem to exert himself in studying the law, which was the reason his father got him the job in the first place. As the narrator puts it: “He had a little desk to himself, but he did not use it much. Upon inspection, the drawer exhibited a great array of the shells of various sorts of nuts. Indeed, to this quick-witted youth the whole noble science of the law was contained in a nut-shell” (“B” 18).

Prior to hiring Bartleby, the narrator is therefore already used to being moderately parasitized, and it seems that he has learned to make the best of the situation, at least if it does not interfere unduly with his business. Speaking of Turkey and Nippers, he mentions that “I never had to do with their eccentricities at one time. Their fits relieved each other like guards. . . . This was a good natural arrangement under the circumstances” (“B” 18). He still manages to keep his office in a state close to equilibrium where, in Andrew Knighton’s words, “alternating currents of productivity and unproductivity compensate for each other” (191).¹⁴³ This might help explain his relative lenience toward the scrivener, illustrating a well-known point in parasitology: The more parasites a given host harbors, the more likely it is to suffer additional infections.¹⁴⁴

143 Knighton’s next sentence should also be quoted: “Bartleby’s force is single-handedly to disrupt these equilibria” (191). This indicates a similarity between the effects the scrivener has on his surroundings and those of Tommo on the Typees: In both cases, a foreign element is introduced into a system in or near equilibrium, only to cause a rupture at the system’s bifurcation point, forcing it into a new direction. No less than Tommo, Bartleby exemplifies Michel Serres’ claim that the parasite is “an inclination toward trouble, to the change of phase of a system. It is a little troublemaker” (*Parasite* 196).

144 Biologists often invoke the so-called 80:20 rule to explain how the parasite population is aggregated among the potential hosts, meaning that at least 80% of parasites will be found in 20% of the hosts, see Bishop (41).

In addition to his previous exposure to semi-parasitic employees, the narrator's reaction the first time Bartleby "prefers not to" indicates that there may be important additional reasons for his unwillingness or inability to fire him:

I looked at him steadfastly. His face was leanly composed; his gray eye dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless 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. ("B" 20-21)

There is thus something in the scrivener's manner that makes the lawyer feel incapable of firing him, and even after he tries to force himself to do so, his attempts are insecure and stumbling. Bartleby, in fact, seems to hold some sort of strange power over his employer. How then should we understand this, as the narrator puts it, "wondrous ascendancy which the inscrutable scrivener had over me" ("B" 35)? Here, Tom Lutz might be on to something when he claims that "the narrator's inability to get rid of him is downright pathological" (131). It is almost as if the lawyer has been infected by something that controls his thoughts and actions, ensuring that he will not be capable of ridding himself of his foe. For instance, when a few days later the scrivener again indicates that he would prefer not to comply with a request, the narrator's response is strangely muted by Bartleby's mildness:

With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and trust him ignominiously from my presence. But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner touched and disconcerted me. I began to reason with him. ("B" 21)

The last sentence is evidence that the lawyer will get nowhere: trying to reason with the scrivener is about as useful as arguing with a rock. Later, he will also say that "it was his wonderful mildness chiefly, which not only disarmed me, but unmanned me, as it were" ("B" 27), indicating

that Bartleby in effect renders him impotent—if not literally, at least metaphorically, and perhaps also grammatically.¹⁴⁵

To address this seeming impotence, I want to briefly turn to the parasitic barnacle *Sacculina carcini*.¹⁴⁶ It starts life like any free-living barnacle, but after injecting itself into a common crab, it grows inside it almost like a nutrient-absorbing rhizome.¹⁴⁷ While the host goes on eating, it is in effect feeding the parasite inhabiting it. If the barnacle manages to reproduce inside its new, living home, thousands of larvae are produced every few weeks. This coincides with a fascinating manipulation of the crab's behavior. The crab is sterilized, and the parasite's larvae grow on the underside of the host's belly, where the brood pouch containing the female crab's own eggs would be located. This is also the case for male crabs. Due to changes caused by the parasite to their bodies and behavior, not only do they grow larger abdomens than uninfected males, which means there will be room for the larvae, but they also start acting like females, suddenly showing an interest in nurturing offspring. Its original sex notwithstanding, the infected crab thus ends up grooming and looking after the parasite's larvae as if they were its own. The crab is turned into a living nursery, as it were; to quote Carl Zimmer: "parasites such as *Sacculina* ... control their hosts, becoming in effect their new brain, and turning them into new creatures. It is as if the host itself is simply a puppet, and the parasite is the hand inside" (82).

Even though the power of *Sacculina carcini* over the crab is obviously much stronger than that of Bartleby over the narrator, Zimmer's description might still shed light on Melville's story. After all, on several occasions the lawyer comes close to accepting that he is fated to be stuck

145 J. Hillis Miller draws our attention to the narrator's statement immediately following the remark that he has been "unmanned" by Bartleby: "For I consider that one, for the time, is a *sort of unmanned* when he tranquilly permits his hired clerk to dictate to him, and order him away from his own premises" ("B" 27; emphasis added). As Miller sees it, the lacking noun after "a sort of unmanned" deprives the sentence of sense, leading him to the conclusion that "[t]his grammatical impotence corresponds to the narrator's unmanned state" (*Versions* 161).

146 *Sacculina carcini*, which was originally classified by the British zoologist John Vaughan Thompson in 1836, came to be singled out for special scorn by E. Ray Lankester, Henry Drummond, and other naturalists, see Zimmer (16–22) and Gould.

147 For Bartleby considered in terms of the Deleuzian concept of the rhizome, see Arsić ("Active Habits" 144).

with the scrivener. For example, at one point he concludes that his predestined "mission in this world, Bartleby, is to furnish you with office-room for such a period as you may see fit to remain" ("B" 37). Later, it is only due to critical comments from his clients that he manages to jolt himself out of his stupor: "a great change was wrought in me. I resolved to gather all my faculties together, and for ever rid me of this intolerable incubus" ("B" 38).

Nonetheless, even after he leaves Bartleby behind, it is obvious that the scrivener's hold over the narrator continues:

Established in my new quarters, for a day or two I kept the door locked, and started at every footfall in the passages. When I returned to my rooms after any little absence, I would pause at the threshold for an instant, and attentively listen, ere applying my key. But these fears were needless. Bartleby never came nigh me. ("B" 39)

As time passes, he starts to relax, but he still seems caught up in an inner battle over whether he is responsible for the scrivener. Even after finally removing himself from Bartleby's immediate influence, it is as if the narrator is a host partially controlled by his parasite, and where the part of his mind that is captive—which legitimizes its claims in terms of charity or responsibility towards others—is in constant combat with the part that wants to break free.

This newfound freedom is only temporary, however. Learning that Bartleby, who has been evicted from the offices, has started inhabiting the hallways of the building, the narrator is forced to return by the landlord and the other tenants. Trying to help them get rid of the scrivener, he makes several suggestions for alternative jobs for which Bartleby might be better suited. Since he would prefer not to do any more copying, the narrator suggests that he could become a clerk in a dry-goods store, a bartender, a bill-collector, or even go "as a companion to Europe, to entertain some young gentleman with your conversation" ("B" 41). However, even the prospect of receiving food, lodging, and a salary as payment for keeping a rich patron company with idle talk—surely the ultimate vocation for any classical parasite—is something Bartleby would prefer not to. In a moment of fundamental resignation, the exasperated narrator is finally

struck by an idea that “had not been wholly unindulged before” (“B” 41), namely, to offer the scrivener a new habitat:

“Bartleby,” said I, in the kindest tone I could assume under such exciting circumstances, “will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my dwelling—and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure? Come, let us start now, right away.” (“B” 41)

Free food and lodging: What more could any parasite possibly want? The scrivener, though, makes the following answer, once and for all proving that his parasitic traits notwithstanding, he is no typical sponger: “No: at present I would prefer not to make any change at all” (“B” 41). This maddening stubbornness puts the narrator in such a mindset that he runs away, while the scrivener, on the other hand, continues staring at the blank walls in his own inscrutable way.

In other words, while there is a certain logic to labelling Bartleby a parasite, there are also serious obstacles to this procedure. One is that he prefers not to make any changes at all. Any parasite unwilling to adapt to changing circumstances is as good as a dead parasite—as the British helminthologist T. Spencer Cobbold argued in 1864: “None of the internal parasites ‘continue in one stay;’ all have a tendency to roam; migration is the very soul of their prosperity; change in residence the *sine quâ non* of their existence, whilst a blockade in the interior, prolonged beyond the proper period, terminates only in cretification and death” (4).

The second obstacle, which is even more important, is pinpointed in William G. Little’s *The Waste Fix* (2002), one of the few critical works that has explicitly, albeit briefly, reflected upon “Bartleby” in terms of parasitism, instead of simply labelling him a parasite. After first remarking that to cut into the whales they have caught, the seamen in *Moby-Dick* must attach themselves to their surface “like a kind of parasite,”¹⁴⁸ Little makes the following claim: “Bartleby, it turns out, is an unsettling

148 Little could have been more specific: the sailors come to occupy a position as *ectoparasites* on the whales. When Tashtego falls into the the sperm whale’s head in Chapter 78, only to be rescued by Queequeg, it can be seen as a temporary and involuntary change of career from ecto- to endoparasite (*MD* 342).

parasite in his own right (he lodges himself within the chambers of his employer/host yet doesn't seem to derive any nourishment from the attachment) and produces a similar tumult amongst the crew in the law office" (59–60).

Thus, while Bartleby comes to inhabit the narrator's offices, he does so without drawing any sustenance from his host. Even though he might initially appear to qualify as a parasite, is it possible to continue seeing him as such, considering what Gillian Brown has claimed to be his "primary feature," namely that he seems to have no interest in eating (147)?

Several times throughout the story, the narrator ponders this seeming lack of sitological habits; as Allen F. Stein argues: "of all Bartleby's peculiar preferences the one which seems most consistently to perplex the lawyer is his preferring not to eat" (29). After the second instance where the scrivener has preferred not to examine his copies, it is food the narrator turns to, to explain this odd behavior: "His late remarkable conduct led me to regard his ways narrowly. I observed that he never went to dinner; indeed he never went any where" ("B" 23). The lawyer then remarks how he has noticed that Ginger Nut regularly purchases ginger cakes for Bartleby, but is incapable of making up his mind about this strange choice of diet:

He lives, then, on ginger-nuts, thought I; never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian then; but no; he never eats even vegetables, he eats nothing but ginger-nuts. My mind then ran on in reveries concerning the probable effects upon the human constitution of living entirely on ginger-nuts. Ginger-nuts are so called because they contain ginger as one of their peculiar constituents, and the final flavoring one. Now what was ginger? A hot, spicy thing. Was Bartleby hot and spicy? Not at all. Ginger, then, had no effect upon Bartleby. Probably he preferred it should have none. ("B" 23)¹⁴⁹

It is thus revealed that Bartleby appears to eat nothing except ginger-nuts and perhaps also, as indicated later in the story, some cheese ("B" 27). Even

¹⁴⁹ For an analysis of the role played by ginger in "Bartleby," see Arsić, who argues that it might be a metaphor for drugs: "Bartleby, the opium eater" (*Passive* 74). On ginger in Melville's *oeuvre*, see Savarese.

so, these references likely say more about the narrator's way of understanding those he interacts with in terms of food, than it does about the scrivener. As Gillian Brown has argued, this somewhat excessive concern with the eating habits of his employees—not just of Bartleby, but also of Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut—makes the narrator “a kind of Wall Street housekeeper” (146). In light of their peculiarities, she contends that he must keep a keen eye on his employees' consumption of food and drink to keep his business running as smoothly as possible:

The business of the lawyer's domestic commercial sphere chiefly involves over-seeing and compensating for the unhealthy gustatory habits of his copyists. . . . For the lawyer, these concerns with food and drink are labor/management issues: what his employees consume directly affects what they produce. In this office in the image of home, the eccentricities of appetite are incorporated into the business routine. (G. Brown 146)¹⁵⁰

This habit perhaps helps explain why, when Bartleby starts “preferring not to,” his eating habits are the first thing the narrator turns to, and why he keeps pursuing the question of nourishment, his continuing lack of success notwithstanding. For example, sometime after his failed attempt to suggest new lines of work to the scrivener, the lawyer is made aware that the landlord has had Bartleby locked up as a vagrant in New York's infamous prison, The Tombs.¹⁵¹ Feeling responsible and wanting to help, the lawyer decides to visit his former employee. Even though the scrivener makes it clear that, as he mysteriously puts it, “I know you . . . and I want nothing to say to you” (“B” 43), the narrator still thinks he might contribute to his well-being by bribing the aptly named Mr. Cutlets, who describes his unofficial duties in the prison as follows: “Such gentlemen as have friends here, hire me to provide them with something good to eat” (“B” 43). However,

150 A similar point is made by Knighton, who refers to “the many ways in which the office is organized around its inhabitants' literal and figurative appetites” (204).

151 The idea of having Bartleby arrested had earlier struck the narrator, but, pondering this solution, he asks himself “upon what ground could you procure such a thing to be done?—a vagrant, is he? What! He a vagrant, a wanderer, who refuses to budge? It is because he will *not* be a vagrant, then, that you seek to count him *as* a vagrant. That is too absurd” (“B” 38). Part of Bartleby's hold over him thus seems to arise from how the former's presence turns the logic and method the lawyer takes such pride in against himself.

when Mr. Cutlets requests the scrivener's company for dinner, his reply is simple: "I prefer not to dine to-day," said Bartleby, turning away. "It would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners" ("B" 43, 44).¹⁵²

Scholars have made different suggestions regarding this refusal to eat: Bartleby could perhaps be suffering from what would in 1873 come to be termed *anorexia*, or from the medical condition known as *dyspepsia*, as argued by Gillian Brown and Ralph James Savarese, respectively. Or maybe it is *sitophobia*—a morbid dread of eating or aversion to food—that ails him? No matter which term best describes the scrivener's abstinence from consumption, and no matter what his actual reasons for fasting might be, the result is clear—it is obvious that he simply prefers not eating.¹⁵³ In fact, the only time in the story when the narrator describes Bartleby as stuffing himself, it is not on food, but on work. This occurs as part of the description of the scrivener's first few days in the office: "As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light" ("B" 19). Hence, Bartleby rarely consumes anything, and when he does, it is in a way that increases, rather than decreases what he feeds on.

To sum up at this point, if Bartleby is indeed a parasite on the narrator, he is one without interest in food or money, even though he could easily have gotten both out of his host. The only thing he with certainty can be said to get out of the relationship, at least for a time, is a habitat and a blank wall to stare upon. This is not without importance; to quote Serres' explanation of the origin of property rights: "Whoever was a lodger for a long time, ... remembers someone who was not willing to divide the salad course. When the salad bowl came, he spat in it, and the greens were his. The salad was all his; no one argued with him" (*Parasite* 139, 140). Thus, to

152 Mr. Cutlets reappears when the narrator revisits the Tombs some days later, only to find Bartleby dead, proving that the scrivener is no more interested in eating when the lawyer is not around: "The round face of the grub-man peered upon me now. 'His dinner is ready. Won't he dine to-day, either? Or does he live without dining?' 'Lives without dining,' said I, and closed the eyes" ("B" 45).

153 As such, Bartleby helped clear the path later taken by the "Hungerkünstler," after whom Franz Kafka's famous short story is named. On the close affinity between Melville and Kafka, see Borges (246).

Serres, the parasite's power does not result from the use of force to control a space, but from making a milieu uninhabitable for others, so that one can inhabit it without competition. Or as he puts it, in what could just as well have been a description of how Bartleby finally causes the narrator to give up his offices: "The parasite gets power less because he occupies the center than because he fills the environment" (*Parasite* 95).¹⁵⁴

His habitat notwithstanding, the question naturally arises: What sort of parasite not only drives away the host, but also shows a complete lack of interest in re-attaching himself to him, even though the opportunity to do so arises on several occasions? And most importantly: Can he be said to be a parasite when he willingly abstains from eating? Since the fact that parasites feed on other animals has been an axiom for parasitological definitions ever since the term was adopted by the natural sciences, such a creature hardly deserves the epithet. Even though the manner of feeding is obviously different, this point is equally important to the classical understanding. This is for instance explicitly spelled out in "The Parasite: Parasitic an Art," written in Greek in the second century AD by the Assyrian rhetorician and satirist Lucian of Samosata.¹⁵⁵ This quasi-Socratic dialogue presents a discussion between two interlocutors, Simon and Tychiades, about what is the greatest of all arts. The former offers the radical suggestion that the answer is being a parasite, which he defines as follows: "Parasitic is that art which is concerned with food and drink and what must be said and done to obtain them, and its end is pleasure" (Lucian 9). When asked by his companion how the parasite is affected by a lack of food, he gives the following answer:

154 This resonates well with the narrator's reflections on the possibility of Bartleby "turning out a long-lived man, and keep occupying my chambers, and denying my authority; ... and in the end perhaps outlive me, and claim possession of my office by right of his perpetual occupancy" ("B" 38).

155 Whether Melville had read "The Parasite" is not clear, but he was familiar with Lucian and his English translator, William Tooke: The latter's 1820 translation of "The True History" is quoted in the "Extracts" of *Moby-Dick* (*MD* xviii); in the angry letter sent to Pierre by his publishers, Steel, Flint & Asbestos, Lucian is labeled a "vile Atheist" (*P* 356); in *Israel Potter* (1855), Tooke is indirectly referred to as "a good-natured English Clergyman [who] translated Lucian" (82); and one of the swindlers in *The Confidence-Man* at one point accuses Lucian—along with Thucydides, Juvenal, and Tacitus—of spreading views particularly "injurious to human nature" (*CM* 27).

You fail to understand, Tychiades, that *a priori* one who lacks food is not a parasite. ... If the brave man is brave for no other reason than because he has bravery at his command, and the sensible man because he has sense at his command, so, too, the parasite is a parasite because he has food at his command; consequently, if this be denied him, we shall be studying some other man instead of a parasite. (Lucian 54)¹⁵⁶

While this definition ignores the many parasites of comedy who fail to feed, it alerts us to the fact that the idea of a parasite with absolutely no *interest* in food is counterintuitive, to say the least; to quote Serres: "Not eating, not even being hungry, is erasing oneself as a parasite" (*Parasite* 109). As if the paradox of a scrivener who prefers not to copy was not enough, here, then, is a potential parasite who prefers not to eat: Bartleby, the anorexic parasite.

A Sweet Morsel for the Narrator

So far, the focus has been on what Bartleby may be said to get out of the narrator. As there is little doubt that it is the latter who acts as the host of the relationship, this is logical. Ever since these concepts were adopted by the natural sciences, it has always been an axiom that it is the parasite that takes advantage of the host. However, as David Cecil Smith explains in "The Symbiotic Condition" (1992), the matter is sometimes more complicated. Contrasting parasitism and symbiosis, he argues that whereas the former concept involves hosts being exploited by their associates,

156 "The Parasite" contains an ironic twist that inverts the relationship between the two companions, but if Melville read the dialogue, he would not have been aware of this, as this part had strangely been omitted in Tooke's translation. Simon eventually manages to convince Tychiades that being a parasite is the greatest art, but the latter has a surprise for him: "Hereafter I shall go to you like a schoolboy both in the morning and after luncheon to learn your art. You, for your part, ought to teach me ungrudgingly, for I shall be your first pupil. They say that mothers love their first children more" (Lucian 61). Simon has thus acquired a parasite of his own; as Graham Anderson puts it: "within the limitations of Platonic dialogue the author has turned the tables on Simon. So far the latter has won every round with his absurd demonstrations ..., only to find that his false reasoning has brought him a parasite at his own expense!" (64). The moral is that no one is safe from attracting parasites, not even those who have perfected the parasitic art; in Serres' words: "In short, the parasite has but one enemy: the one who can replace him in his position of parasite" (*Parasite* 107).

the latter involves hosts exploiting them, leading him to the following conclusion: “The question will arise of whether there are situations in which a symbiont simultaneously exploits its host as it is being exploited” (7).¹⁵⁷ In other words, in certain instances hosts may derive benefits at the expense of their parasites; the habitat strikes back. Could this be the case in Melville’s story?

To answer this question, a closer look at the narrator is necessary. First, he mentions that he is a lawyer working on Wall Street. As noted in Chapter 2, to Charles Dickens, both lawyers and capitalists were seen as particularly prone to parasitism. This opinion was also common in America. Steve Fraser has for example argued that there is a long tradition of social reformers conceptualizing rampant capitalism in such terms, where Wall Street was perceived as amassing “its fabulous riches like a parasite, living off the fruits of the honest labor of impoverished farmers, sweated industrial workers, and self-sacrificing, frugal entrepreneurs” (7). Similarly, in relation to the public image of the lawyer, Ruth M. Elson has made the claim that in American schoolbooks of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, “lawyers as a class are looked on with suspicion. The law is regarded generally as a parasitic occupation” (26).

Since the narrator belongs to both groups, it should come as no surprise that he has been accused of being a parasite by scholars reading the story as a parable of the dehumanization of life and work under capitalism. In his *The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1978), H. Bruce Franklin for example makes the following claim, which is in line with the Marxist conceptualization of the parasite encountered in Chapter 2:

To Melville, the underlying sexual perversion of our society is the enslavement of human beings, imprisoning them in factories, ships, plantations, and offices, forcing them to expend their creativity to enrich a handful of parasites who own the means of production. Master of this hell is none other than the capitalist. (56)

157 In biology, the term symbiont can refer to any organism living in a symbiotic relationship with another organism, no matter if the relationship is parasitic, commensalistic, or mutualistic. Mutualisms are often understood as different organisms cooperating for their mutual benefit, but Smith claims that it might be better to see their relationship as one where they are simultaneously taking advantage of each other in such a manner that a balance has been reached.

Franklin admits that the narrator's behavior in the story seems to contradict this claim. His own faults and peculiarities asides, there is no doubt he does his best to help his strange scrivener. There is an easy solution to this problem, however; as Franklin puts it: "The narrator is not an unkind, much less a Satanic, man. But he is an employer" (*The Victim* 56). In this way, the discrepancy between the bloodthirsty capitalist and the kindness of the narrator is easily resolved through shifting the question of parasitism to a structural level. Even though the narrator might privately be a good man, he is also a capitalist, and thereby by definition a parasite.

To me, this understanding is not very useful. This is not because I wish to defend capitalism against the claim that it dehumanizes workers, but rather because conceptualizing those thought to be non-producers—no matter if rich or poor—as parasites on the social body takes for granted the erroneous idea that parasites are lazy, where in reality, this is far from the case. Because dinner-invitations are not always forthcoming, and since it is easy to be wiped out by the immune system of your host, being a successful parasite demands a lot of ingenuity. As the narrator at one point remarks in *White-Jacket*, "every one knows that idleness is the hardest work in the world" (*WJ* 22).¹⁵⁸ Still, I wish to suggest that the narrator does indeed have some parasitic traits, but in contrast to Franklin, I do not think these have much to do with him being a typical capitalistic employer. In fact, one thing that makes his parasitic traits so fascinating is that, in the end, the lawyer is quite a strange specimen of a capitalist. To explain why, it is useful to have a closer look at his attitude to work, as expressed early in the story:

I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best. Hence, though I belong to a profession proverbially energetic and nervous, even to turbulence, at times, yet nothing of the sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace. I am one of those

158 For an analysis of the intricate dependency between idleness and labor, see Tom Lutz' juxtaposition of Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Johnson in *Doing Nothing*. While Franklin is often seen as the incarnation of the Protestant work ethic, and Johnson as the father of the modern figure of the idler, Lutz shows how they both embody the opposition between work and non-work (56–75).

unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds. ("B" 14)

This stated preference for "the easiest way of life" is a far cry from Weber's Protestant work ethic, and whoever utters these words certainly does not consider work a calling or a moral imperative. Rather, as critics have argued, the lawyer is someone who has an "inherent penchant for unproductivity" and who "is himself a bit of a loafer" (Knighton 190; Lutz 132).¹⁵⁹ When the specific position the narrator was in when hiring Bartleby is taken into consideration, it becomes even more evident that minimizing stress is as important to him as maximizing his income, if not more so: "Some time prior to the period at which this little history begins, my avocations had been largely increased. The good old office, now extinct in the State of New York, of a Master in Chancery, had been conferred upon me. It was not a very arduous office, but very pleasantly remunerative" ("B" 14).¹⁶⁰

In "'Bartleby,' Allan Melville, and the Court of Chancery" (2011), Warren Broderick explains what made the position ideal for someone with an aversion to stress. Masters in Chancery were hired for three years at a time and would be reappointed as long as they stayed politically connected. As their cases were assigned by the court, they did not have to seek out clients of their own. Finally, they only dealt with civil equity, which meant no unpleasant exposure to thugs and common criminals

159 While Lutz is right to consider the narrator as a loafer-figure of sorts, the following claim is less convincing: "Although he interprets his own disinclination to fire Bartleby as charity, the story suggests it to be primarily an avoidance of the effort it might take" (132).

160 For similar opinions about Chancery, see Robert Grant White's *Law and Laziness; or, Students at Law of Leisure* (1846), which Knighton argues was a direct influence on "Bartleby." Here it is claimed that "[t]here is no place like a law-office for making a fashionable acquaintance, and doing the least work with the greatest ease" (White qtd. in Knighton 191). See also the 1844 letter from Melville's brother Allan where he noted that their brother Gansevoort had been appointed Examiner in Chancery, or assistant to the Master, a position he described as "a very fair office and one which pays quite well" (*Corr* 567). After Gansevoort quit this job to focus on his political career, he was replaced by Allan, who was also a lawyer. As Warren Broderick has argued, Herman and his wife, Elizabeth, shared a residence with Allan and his wife, Sophia, in New York in the period 1847–1850. This means that most of Herman's knowledge of the Court of Chancery probably came from him.

that could lead to the sort of "vulgar bullying," "bravado" and "choleric hectoring" the narrator wants to avoid when he tries to rid himself of Bartleby ("B" 33). The narrator's use of the word "avocation" to describe his work is thus telling, his true *vocation* seeming to be leisure.¹⁶¹ Hence, this "good old office" must have seemed like a dream come true, which can also explain his anger at having subsequently lost it, due to political reforms.¹⁶²

Broderick is not the only critic to have noted the importance of the narrator's position to the story. Herbert F. Smith, for instance, argues that from a democratic point of view, the existence of Courts of Chancery in America in the nineteenth century represented an "extraordinary anachronism" (736). Stemming from England in the fourteenth century, they were originally instituted as an alternative to courts of common law, differing from these in two important respects. First, they were based on principles of *equity* rather than on common law, trying to achieve justice through taking into consideration external circumstances of the kind that normal courts did not address; in Cornelia Vismann's words: "In consequence two types of law were differentiated: the hard and the soft, the strict and the merciful, the legal and the human" (141). Also, the two types of law received their legitimacy from different sources: "The Master in Chancery, essentially, draws his power from association with the king, not at all from 'below,' from the common-law courts and, in a democracy, from the people" (H. F. Smith 736). In other words, Courts of Chancery—which, as noted in Chapter 2, also play an important part in Dickens' *Bleak House*—were

161 According to the *OED*, the word has as one of its original meanings something diverting one from one's true vocation, or a "minor or less important occupation, a by-work" ("avocation").

162 New York phased out the Court of Chancery in July 1847. To the narrator, this was a hard blow: "I seldom lose my temper; much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages; but I must be permitted to be rash here and declare, that I consider the sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Master in Chancery, by the new Constitution, as a—premature act; inasmuch as I had counted upon a life-lease of the profits, whereas I only received those of a few short years. But this is by the way" ("B" 14). The wry humor of the passage is the result of the narrator's lack of talent for anger: even when he makes a conscious effort to be "rash," his anger is not even strong enough to last him through the entire sentence, petering out into nothing after the dash.

pre-capitalistic and aristocratic institutions that had somehow managed to survive in America well into the nineteenth century.¹⁶³

Rather than a typical capitalist, as Franklin thought, the narrator should therefore be understood as a remnant from an aristocratic past—in Nick Yablon’s words, “a relic of an age of Chancery privileges” (121)—who has attached himself to the very heart of American capitalism. Feeding on Wall Street’s flow of business, he is all the while perfectly content with his own aristocratic advantages; as Basem L. Ra’ad puts it:

The narrator ... is now only marginally subjected to the primary motives of the capitalistic enterprise. He has become a parasite at the service end of already established American capital—a “safe” man who is self-congratulatory about the rich he services and resentful about any threat to his established self-interest. (181)

To explain the nature of these aristocratic privileges, the narrator’s position is for instance most likely not one he has rightfully earned. Since the *OED* lists one of the meanings of the verb confer as “[t]o give, grant, bestow, as a grace, or as the act of a qualified superior” (“confer”), when he tells readers that his job has been “conferred upon” him, this strongly implies that it has been bestowed upon him by a superior as a favor. That is to say, the position of Master in Chancery should be understood as “a politically appointed sinecure” (Lutz 132), or a gift from a patron, perhaps in return for the narrator’s faithful services in the past and perhaps—remembering Marcel Mauss’ insistence

163 *Bleak House* presents an extremely negative opinion of the (British) Court of Chancery, at one point described as “most pestilent of hoary sinners” (Dickens 14). As David Jaffé has argued, in writing “Bartleby,” Melville was fundamentally indebted to Dickens’ novel, which was serialized in America between April 1852 and October 1853 in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, which Melville subscribed to. Jaffé’s claim is that Bartleby might be modeled after Dickens’ scrivener Nemo (Latin for “no one”), but that he also has traits in common with the childlike parasite Harold Skimpole. He also points out similarities between the narrator and Dickens’ John Jarndyce; Turkey and Mr. Boythorn; Nippers and William Guppy; and Ginger Nut and Young Smallweed. For the argument that “Bartleby” is an extended attack on Dickens, see Weisbuch (36–54).

that the gift always carries an obligation to be reciprocated—in expectancy of favors yet to come.¹⁶⁴

While it is not said exactly how the narrator has come into possession of this gift, what he has done to earn it, or who has bestowed it upon him, it is worth noting that the description of his “pleasantly remunerative” and “not very arduous office” comes immediately after his references to John Jacob Astor (1763–1848). Astor was not only New York’s richest man at the time—“America’s first multimillionaire,” as the title of one recent biography puts it—but also landlord over large parts of the city.¹⁶⁵ Finally, he is also someone for whom the narrator has an obvious respect, bordering on awe:

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 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. (“B” 14)

This is important because the man whose good opinion the narrator was “not insensible” to was no stranger to New York’s Court of Chancery; in the words of Claudia Durst Johnson: “in this court, which heard cases involving contract violations, debts, and real estate, John Jacob Astor had appeared repeatedly to foreclose on mortgages and collect debts” (21). To have a trusted client installed as Master of Chancery would surely have been helpful to Astor, who was known to be well aware of the advantages

164 The narrator’s use of the adjective “remunerative” deserves mention, stemming from the Latin *remunerari*, from *re* (back) and *munerari* (to give). The latter comes from the noun *munus*, which can mean office or duty, but also gift. All these meanings come together in his promotion to Master in Chancery, a rewarding position that has been given him as a gift, but which likely carries obligations toward whoever he received it from.

165 On Astor as America’s first multimillionaire, see Madsen. On his importance to “Bartleby,” see D’Avanzo, McCall (124–25), Barbra Foley, C. D. Johnson (19–21), and Guillen (193–96). Astor’s notoriously vague will is satirized in *Mardi*’s Chapter 177, “At last, the last Mention is made of old Bardianna; and His last Will and Testament is recited at Length” (*M* 582–85).

of having loyal friends secured in the right places.¹⁶⁶ Even though the story carefully avoids saying so outright, one possible sense of what the narrator has in mind is imparted to the reader when he claims to have been “not unemployed in my profession” by Astor (“B” 14).

In addition to the narrator’s aversion to stress and his income being based upon a position within a patronage economy (no matter if Astor was his actual patron or not), a previously mentioned point must be repeated: To a large degree, he seems to think in terms of food, time and again trying to make sense of his own experiences and his employees through notions of nourishment. As opposed to *Bartleby’s* lack of interest in the demands of the stomach, the narrator—no less than the classical parasites of comedy—seems to have edibles on his mind.¹⁶⁷ What’s more, the story indicates that it is *he*, rather than the scrivener, who nourishes himself from their association. This becomes evident in an oft quoted passage where he reflects upon the various advantages and disadvantages of his employee’s presence:

He is useful to me. I can get along with him. 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 wilfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove *a sweet morsel for my conscience.* (“B” 23–24; emphasis added)

¹⁶⁶ Mario D’Avanzo for example points out that Astor had been the patron of the poet Fitz-Greene Halleck, as well as Washington Irving, who in turn had helped Melville get *Typee* published in America. Even though Irving (along with James Fenimore Cooper) is often held to be the first American author who made a living from selling his books on the open market, he also made a great deal of money through his association with his patron, from whom he received \$10,000 for writing *Astoria* (1836), a fawning travelogue of Astor’s conquests.

¹⁶⁷ As Allen F. Stein has pointed out, the “doctrine of assumptions” underlying the narrator’s actions is etymologically connected to eating and nourishment (“B” 35): “Approaching life through a series of assumptions is what Melville depicts in the motif of eating in ‘*Bartleby*.’ Among the definitions which the Oxford English Dictionary lists for *assume* are: ‘to take as being one’s own,’ ‘to arrogate,’ ‘to lay claim to,’ ‘to appropriate,’ and the now obsolete ‘to take into the body (food, nourishment, etc.)’” (33).

It would be difficult to find a passage that better exemplifies Serres' claim: "To give without receipt in kind is to give oneself honor and virtue, to display one's power: that is called charity" (*Hermes* 6). This is not to say that the narrator is a hypocrite who only loves his neighbor if there is something in it for himself. The crucial thing is rather, as the following quote from John Matteson indicates, that for the lawyer (as is perhaps the case for most people), charity is intricately woven into self-interest: "At the same moment that the lawyer determines to do good for Bartleby, he envisions a sort of spiritual cannibalism; Charity becomes an almost parasitic act, enabling the lawyer's soul to savor the juicy satisfaction of relieving another's misfortune" (47). At least for a time, the narrator therefore clearly seems to nourish himself on Bartleby's presence, which functions as support for his view of himself as a charitable man.¹⁶⁸

Who, then, is the parasite of the story: Bartleby or the narrator? The difficulty of answering this question stems from Melville having taken the two most typical traits of the parasite—no matter if in its classical form or in the modern biological conceptualization—and separated them. The scrivener has inherited the parasite's tactics for creating a habitat out of a space belonging to another; the lawyer its hunger and its means of feeding on others. Together, they would seem to make up a complete parasite, but what the story offers its readers is a narrative of an impossible symbiosis that almost, but only almost, adds up; in Serres' words: The parasite "becomes invisible by being impossible. Impossible, absurd, outside reason and logic. That is what is interesting; that is the point; that is what must be thought about. He becomes invisible in the inconceivable" (*Parasite* 218).

168 However, the scrivener's behavior makes it impossible for the narrator to hang on to this "sweet morsel": "But this mood was not invariable with me. The passiveness of Bartleby sometimes irritated me. I felt strangely goaded on to encounter him in new opposition, to elicit some angry spark from him answerable to my own" ("B" 24). The problem is not that he is unwilling to offer charity to his employee, but rather that the latter does not act in a manner fitting one receiving hospitality; as Serres puts it: "The counterpart of charity, of the gift without counterpart, is the whole of the poor man's conduct" (*Hermes* 6).

The Replicating Formula

Who, then, is the ultimate parasite of Melville's story? Bartleby himself? The narrator? Or neither? In this final part of the chapter, I want to explore a third possibility. To do so, it is first necessary to turn to the scholars who have shifted the analytical focus away from the two main characters, and towards the nature and force of the scrivener's famous utterance. Chief among these is Gilles Deleuze.¹⁶⁹ In "Bartleby; or, The Formula," which appeared in his last book, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (1993), he insists that the story must be understood *literally*:

"Bartleby" is neither a metaphor for the writer nor the symbol of anything whatsoever. It is a violently comical text, and the comical is always literal. . . . It means only what it says, literally. And what it says and repeats is *I would prefer not to*. This is the formula of its glory, which every loving reader repeats in turn. A gaunt and pallid man has uttered the formula that drives everyone crazy. But in what does the literality of the formula consist? (Deleuze 68)

The question, then, is whether Deleuze's change of perspective from characters to utterance is relevant to the analysis of the parasitical relationship playing out in the story: Could it be that just as Bartleby and the narrator have parasitic traits, so does the scrivener's formula?

Before answering this question, one obvious objection must be raised: Does it make sense to say that an utterance such as "I would prefer not to" can have parasitic traits? The notion that ideas or utterances can be likened to parasites, has been given scientific legitimacy through Richard Dawkins' theory of the *meme*. His book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) argues that human beings might be understood from the perspective of their DNA. Rather than people being masters of their own bodies, such a change of perspective opens the radical possibility that "we, and all other animals, are machines created by our genes" (Dawkins 2). It is thereby suggested

169 Even though Deleuze's reading is not without problematic aspects, his focus on Bartleby's formula has generated considerable interest in Melville's story from continental and political philosophers. For overviews of this critical tradition, see Attell, Jonik ("Murmurs") and my two contributions ("Loving"; "En fremmed"). For an innovative reading of Melville's *oeuvre* in light of Deleuze's philosophy, see Jonik (*Herman Melville*).

that humans might ultimately be there for them, and, consequently, that it is they that make use of their hosts—us—to replicate.

In Chapter 11 of *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins goes on to suggest that other types of replicators than DNA exist. In particular, he focuses on the cultural equivalents of genes, which he terms *memes*—meme being “a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*” (Dawkins 192). As he sees it, just like genes, such units—which roughly correspond to *complex ideas*—have as their ultimate “goal” their own survival through replication.¹⁷⁰ All it takes to consider them as entities that use their hosts in order to spread is therefore a change of perspective; in Dawkins’ words: “What we have not previously considered is that a cultural trait may have evolved in the way that it has, simply because it is *advantageous to itself*” (200; emphasis in the original). Memes can thus make individuals act in a manner that is advantageous to themselves, but detrimental to the well-being of those spreading them—think of suicide bombers giving their lives for their religious beliefs, or soldiers giving theirs for their country. For this reason, Dawkins explicitly likens memes to parasites affecting the behavior of their hosts:

As my colleague N. K. Humphrey neatly summed up an earlier draft of this chapter: “... memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically. *When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell.* And this isn’t just a way of talking—the meme for, say, ‘belief in life after death’ is actually realized physically, millions of times over, as a structure in the nervous systems of individual men the world over.” (192; emphasis added)¹⁷¹

170 Due to the difficulty of defining exactly what counts as a meme, Dawkins also introduces the concept of meme-complexes (or *memeplexes*), consisting of “a co-adapted stable set of mutually-assisting memes” (197). When it comes to the use of “goal” or similar anthropomorphic terms regarding memes, Dawkins obviously does not mean that they have concrete intentions, but rather that memetic replication follows as a natural consequence of basic evolutionary mechanisms.

171 In an explanatory note included in the second edition of his book, Dawkins slightly modifies his original stance. Referring to Juan D. Delius’ attempt to differentiate between different types of memes in “Of Mind Memes and Brain Bugs; a Natural History of Culture,” he makes the following claim: “Among the other interesting things [Delius] does is to explore, far more searchingly than I had done, the analogy of memes with parasites; to be more precise, with the spectrum of which

What I want to do in the following, then, is explore what happens if “I would prefer not to” is considered as a meme, and hence as a “living structure” capable of replicating itself.¹⁷² In fact, this is in many ways similar to what Deleuze and critics such as J. Hillis Miller and Cornelia Vismann—to whose readings of “Bartleby” we will later turn—have done, although from a different perspective, and without reference to Dawkins or the concept of the meme.

To explore this unexpected convergence, it is first necessary to describe the effect the scrivener’s peculiar utterance has on those he encounters. By not doing what is expected of him, he of course slows down the productivity of the office, but what I here have in mind, is rather that there is something profoundly unsettling about the very phrase he utters, especially in combination with his quiet steadfastness and lack of anger. This is where Deleuze might be of help. As he sees it, while the sentence “I would prefer not to” is grammatically and syntactically correct, there is still something not quite right about it. As readers we expect to be told exactly *what* it is Bartleby would prefer not to do, but due to the abrupt ending of the utterance, this information is withheld. In Vismann’s words: “The verb ‘prefer’ is highly referential. It always raises the question—prefer what ...?” (147). The impression the first time he utters the formula, is that Bartleby simply prefers not to do what has been asked of him, to verify the accuracy of his copies. However, the more times the utterance is repeated, the more the suspicion grows that there is in fact *nothing* the narrator could suggest to him that he would “prefer” to do. Due to this openness and undecidability, the formula comes to function as the limit of the series of concrete things one can prefer not to do, capable of

malignant parasites are one extreme, benign ‘symbionts’ the other extreme” (Dawkins 323). In other words, whereas Dawkins originally came close to claiming that memes should *literally* be understood as parasites, he later seemed to consider them parasites in a metaphorical sense.

172 While Melville scholars have so far not addressed Bartleby’s utterance as a meme, O. C. McSwite comes close with the following question: “Imagine if a Bartleby virus (in the form of one of Dawkins’ cultural memes) were to spread rapidly through contemporary society, such that there were more Bartlebys than people still confined to the orthodox social reality. What would happen then?” (201). For a general reading of the “Melville meme” which primarily focuses on *Moby-Dick*, see Bryant (“Wound”).

encompassing them all: not just a, but also b, c, d, e, f, g, and so on.¹⁷³ As a corollary, the scrivener's non-preference should not be understood as him saying *no* to anything. It is rather a way of avoiding having to deal with the opposition between accept and negation altogether, and this is what causes Deleuze to conclude that even if the formula is "at best a localized tick that crops up in certain circumstances," it is nonetheless powerful enough to topple all the social bonds language helps keep alive: "Without a doubt, the formula is ravaging, devastating, and leaves nothing standing in its wake" (72, 70).

One way of explaining this claim is through speech act-theory, as theorized by J. L. Austin in his *How to Do Thing with Words* (1962).¹⁷⁴ In the early part of the book, Austin introduces the distinction between *constative* and *performative* speech-acts—that is, between utterances that refer to what already exists, and those that cause something new to come into being *in* being uttered, and must therefore be assessed by means of other criteria than their truth-value.¹⁷⁵ For Deleuze, one of the fundamental traits of Bartleby's formula is how it effectively collapses this distinction:

In speaking, I do not simply indicate things and actions; I also commit acts that assure a relation with the interlocutor, in keeping with our respective situations: I command, I interrogate, I promise, I ask, I emit "speech acts." Speech acts

173 This resonates well with Jacques Derrida's claim that Bartleby's utterance "evokes the future without either predicting or promising; it utters nothing fixed, determinable, positive, or negative. The modality of this repeated utterance that says nothing, promises nothing, neither refuses nor accepts anything, the tense of this singularly insignificant statement reminds one of a nonlanguage or a secret language" (*Gift* 75).

174 While this is not something I will touch upon here, in *How to Do Things with Words* Austin makes the claim that language used in a way not meant to be taken seriously should be understood as "parasitic upon its normal use" (22), a claim that became central to the heated debate between Jacques Derrida and John R. Searle, see the former's *Limited Inc.* and the latter's "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida." On the debate between the two, see Alfino. For an analysis that connects Austin's claim with Serres' work on the parasite and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "minor literature," see my "Literature and the Parasite."

175 Austin suggests that performatives should be judged according to whether they bring about the intended action or not (14). Those that succeed he labels *happy* (or *felicitous*), whereas those that do not are seen as *unhappy* (or *infelicitous*). According to Austin, the latter category can be subdivided into *misfires* (botched procedures) and *abuses* (where the speech acts are properly executed, but without the intention of abiding by them). Bartleby's speech acts are evidence of the insufficiency of such categories, since it is as difficult to decide what category they belong to as it is to decide what would actually constitute a *happy* or *unhappy* instance of performative non-preference.

are self-referential (I command by saying “I order you ...”), while constative propositions refer to other things and other words. It is this double system of references that *Bartleby* ravages. The formula I PREFER NOT TO excludes all alternatives, and devours what it claims to preserve no less than it distances itself from everything else. It implies that Bartleby stop copying, that is, that he stop reproducing words; it hollows out a zone of indetermination that renders words indistinguishable, that creates a vacuum within language. But it also stymies the speech acts that a boss uses to command, that a kind friend uses to ask questions or a man of faith to make promises. If Bartleby had refused, he could still be seen as a rebel or insurrectionary, and as such would still have a social role. But the formula stymies all speech acts, and at the same time, it makes Bartleby a pure outsider [*exclu*] to whom no social position can be attributed. (Deleuze 73)

A similar reading of the formula as undermining the distinction between constatives and performatives can be found in J. Hillis Miller’s *Versions of Pygmalion*, where he claims that “I would prefer not to,”

is like an endless loop in the process of reasoning. The disruptive energy of this extraordinary group of everyday words is limitless. A shorthand way of describing that power is to say that Bartleby’s sentence cannot be assimilated to any dialectical or oppositional way of thinking. You can neither deny it nor accept it. It is neither constative nor performative, or perhaps it might be better to say it is an exceedingly disquieting form of performative. It is a use of words to make something happen, but what it makes happen is to bring about the impossibility of making anything happen with words. (156)

Miller also notes that through Bartleby’s unwillingness to verify his copies, the unsettling effects of such “performatives which do not perform”—to borrow a phrase from his “The Critic as Host” (206)—also spread to *written* language. For the legal documents he is hired to copy to be accepted in a court of law, there can be no doubt about their authenticity and correctness. This, of course, is why proof-reading them is so important to the narrator:

These documents must be exactly correct in all their copies in order to perform their function, which is to transfer property from one owner to another

or to execute a bond or mortgage, a promise to pay so much interest along with principal over such and such a time. Such a promise, like a property deed, is a speech act. A conveyance is not primarily constative, though it may contain a description of the property in question. A conveyance is properly performative, if it is written right. It is a way of doing things with words. (Miller, *Versions* 148)

By “preferring not to” verify what he has copied, Bartleby in effect makes the copied documents null and void in a legal context. In so doing, he undermines their performative power, turning them into *dead letters* similar to the ones he supposedly handled in his previous job.¹⁷⁶ In effect, the scrivener causes a double short-circuit, both to written and to spoken language; or, to quote Deleuze: “Bartleby has invented a new logic, a *logic of preference*, which is enough to undermine the presuppositions of language as a whole” (73; emphasis in the original).¹⁷⁷

This, however, is only one of the defining traits of the formula—even more important for the present discussion is its highly contagious nature. Like a virus or a disease, it spreads, inflicting the speech of everybody in its vicinity, the other scriveners no less than the narrator; to Deleuze, it is “a trait of expression that contaminates everything” (77). More precisely, the word “prefer” starts popping up in the utterances of the other characters, often without them being aware of it, something Melville applies for comic effects. At one point, the narrator requests that Bartleby “begin to be a little reasonable,” leading the scrivener to reply “[a]t present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable” (“B” 30). Overhearing this, Nippers, who at the time is in a foul mood due to his indigestion, is enraged:

¹⁷⁶ Vismann makes a similar point: “if Bartleby prefers not to examine the copy, he renders the examination impossible and, furthermore, makes the copy itself worthless. A copy is a copy precisely because certified by a comparison with the original which guarantees its *legal* correctness. An unrevised transcript is not a legal copy and must not be allowed into circulation” (144). However, as Arsić has argued, this logic of verification leads to an endless regress: “there are always more witnesses who can be invited to witness the accuracy of a witnessing. And the logic in question suggests that copying is precisely such a process of infinite witnessing” (*Passive* 142).

¹⁷⁷ As opposed to the narrator’s logic of *assumptions* or *presuppositions*, Bartleby’s logic might not be on the side of commonly accepted reason, but, as Deleuze sees it, it is still fully formed and internally consistent. The creation of such an alternative logic of constant becoming is one of the main tasks of what he and Félix Guattari termed “minor literature.” What Deleuze says about “great novelists” might just as well have been said about Bartleby: their work remains “enigmatic yet nonarbitrary: in short, a new logic, definitely a logic, but one that grasps the innermost depths of life and death without leading us back to reason” (82).

“*Prefer not, eh?*” gritted Nippers—“I’d *prefer* him, if I were you, sir,” addressing me—“I’d *prefer* him; I’d give him preferences, the stubborn mule! What is it, sir, pray, that he *prefers* not to do now?”

Bartleby moved not a limb.

“Mr. Nippers,” said I, “I’d prefer that you would withdraw for the present.” (“B” 31; emphasis in the original)

Realizing that he has just used Bartleby’s dreaded word in his reply to Nippers, the narrator then makes the following remark:

Somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using the word “prefer” upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further and deeper aberration might it not yet produce? (“B” 31)

After Nippers leaves, Turkey approaches:

“With submission, sir,” said he, “yesterday I was thinking about Bartleby here, and I think that if he would but prefer to take a quart of good ale every day, it would do much towards mending him, and enabling him to assist in examining his papers.”

“So you have got the word too,” said I, slightly excited.

“With submission, what word, sir,” asked Turkey ... “What word, sir?”

“I would prefer to be left alone here,” said Bartleby, as if offended at being mobbed in his privacy.

“*That’s* the word, Turkey,” said I—“*that’s* it.”

“Oh, *prefer*? oh yes—queer word. I never use it myself. But, sir, as I was saying, if he would but prefer—”

“Turkey,” interrupted I, “you will please withdraw.”

“Oh certainly, sir, if you prefer that I should.”

As he opened the folding-doors to retire, Nippers at his desk caught a glimpse of me, and asked whether I would prefer to have a certain paper copied on blue paper or white. He did not in the least roguishly accent the word *prefer*. It was plain that it involuntarily rolled from his tongue. I thought to myself, surely I must get rid of a demented man, who already has in some degree turned the tongues, if not the heads of myself and clerks. (“B” 31; emphasis in the original)

Even though the scrivener himself "would prefer not to" budge, the formula obviously has no such qualms, constantly proliferating throughout the story. And whereas he—unlike successful parasites classical and biological—is not adaptable to changing circumstances at all, the formula is. Writing about the story, it is easy to focus solely on its generic form, but Deleuze and others have analyzed how it undergoes constant changes, depending on the context and the narrator's various utterances. At different times "I would prefer not to" morphs into: "I prefer not to" ("B" 22, 25); "I *prefer* not" (25); "At present I prefer to give no answer" (30); the above quoted "At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable" (30) and "I would prefer to be left alone here" (31); "I would prefer *not* to quit you" (35); "I would prefer not to make any change" (41); "I would prefer not to take a clerkship" (41); "I would prefer to be doing something else" (41); "at present I would prefer not to make any change at all" (41); and, the final version uttered by Bartleby before dying, "I prefer not to dine to-day" (44). If these examples are indeed all versions of what Deleuze calls "the great indeterminate formula, I PREFER NOT TO, which subsists once and for all and in all cases," and whose "muted presence . . . continues to haunt Bartleby's language" (69), the formula is so adaptable that on occasion, it is also able to turn into its apparent opposite, positive preference, as when the scrivener lets it be known that he wants to be left alone.¹⁷⁸

Since the formula seems to be able to easily adapt to any counter-strategies the narrator can come up with, as well as of replicating itself through the utterances of everyone in the office—turning their minds, in Dawkins' aforementioned words, "into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell"—perhaps *it* could be the story's ultimate parasite. This, at least, is what Vismann hints at when she contends that one of the defining traits of the formula is that in being uttered, it brings about the impossibility

178 In addition, Bartleby also makes other utterances where it is not obvious whether they fall under the formula or not. Deleuze analyzes "I am not particular," which the scrivener utters three times, as the formula's "indispensable complement" (74). J. H. Miller focuses on Bartleby's "gift for absurd literalism" (*Versions* 159), as is in the following quote from the narrator: "Going up the stairs to my old haunt, there was Bartleby silently sitting upon the bannister at the landing. 'What are you doing here, Bartleby?' said I. 'Sitting upon the bannister,' he replied mildly" ("B" 40).

of Bartleby doing those tasks that he claims to “prefer not to” do: “The sentence produces the impossibility of what is asked for. The force of the sentence, then, is autopoietic, without author or offender. Bartleby cannot be held responsible for the consequences” (145). Later returning to the formula’s effects, she offers the further elaboration:

It lives, or rather nourishes itself, on the content of that which can be crossed out. The parasitic structure of the sentence might, thus, explain its pathology—its contingency, as Deleuze has characterized it. The phrase “sprouts and proliferates” to the extent that it builds up a reference that may be cancelled. In its voraciousness it consumes all that could be achieved by affirmation. Due to this peculiar, all too logical structure, the performative force operates anti-performatively or deformatively. (Vismann 147)

If the formula indeed has a “parasitic structure,” then maybe Bartleby’s strange behavior is not so different from that of the castrated crab housing *Sacculina carcini*, after all. Both end up acting in a manner detrimental to their own well-being, but in the best interest of their hidden guest within; as Vismann puts it: “[Bartleby] is consumed by the formula until nothing remains but an inactive and mute *ex-copyist*” (149). The only difference would be that it is Bartleby’s mind, and not his body that is infected, at least according to the narrator: “it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach” (“B” 29). Since it is not clear whether the scrivener’s parasitic traits are properly his own—that is, something he has chosen of his own free will—or simply the result of him being infected by the parasitic formula, which uses him as a *vector* in order to reach its final host, I am reluctant to fully agree with Vismann that Bartleby is “as parasitic as the formula itself—the perfect copyist, one might say” (148). In my opinion, it would be more correct to say that the formula’s parasitic traits greatly exceed his own.

In conclusion, then, Melville’s story can be seen as offering an ingenious example of Serres’ “parasitic chain” where “the last to come tries to supplant his predecessor” (*Parasite* 4): the formula uses Bartleby to spread, and this leads the scrivener—at least from a certain perspective—to parasitize the narrator, who is already a host of sorts to Nippers, Turkey and Ginger Nut. The lawyer, in turn, is no stranger to feeding off

others, leading a relaxed life due to the aristocratic privileges and idleness he seems to have earned through parasitizing his patron. While he thinks that Bartleby will function as a "sweet morsel" for his conscience, in the end, what the scrivener does is shift the miniature system of the story—the law office—irreversibly away from its precarious equilibrium. After his employee's death in prison, this instability leads to the lawyer's attempt to regain homeostasis through narrating his experiences in a meaningful way. His final utterance—"Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!"—might perhaps then be understood as the weary, but contented sigh of the leisure-seeking narrator as he realizes that the fluctuations set in motion by this strange foreign body are finally calming down.

However, while these are the last words of the story, they do not end the proliferation of the formula—far from it. As attested to by the Bartleby Industry's extraordinary diligence, it continues replicating outside of Melville's text. Every time "I would prefer not to" is reiterated by eager and puzzled scholars—the present author not excluded—the Bartleby-meme spreads and undergoes new mutations as it is made to fit into yet new explanatory contexts. The hope is that in the process, a little bit of the creative madness of Melville's story is also transferred anew. In the end, this is perhaps what readers and critics owe to great works of literature.