



Thompson, Graham (2000) 'Dead letters! ... Dead men?': the rhetoric of the office in Melville's 'Bartleby, the scrivener'. *Journal of American Studies*, 34 (3). pp. 395-411. ISSN 1469-5154

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**Graham Thompson**

**“Dead letters! ... Dead Men?”: The Rhetoric of the Office in  
Melville’s ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’**

## I

Although a good deal of recent critical attention to Melville's writing has followed the lead of Robert K. Martin in addressing the issue of sexuality, the predominant themes in discussions of 'Bartleby' remain changes in the nature of the workplace in antebellum America and transformations in capitalism.<sup>1</sup> But if one of the abiding mysteries of the story is the failure of the lawyer-narrator to sever his relationship with his young scrivener once Bartleby embarks upon his policy of preferring not to, it is a mystery that makes sense within both of these critical discourses. On the one hand the longevity of the relationship dramatizes a tension implicit in Michael Gilmore's suggestion that the lawyer-narrator straddles the old and the new economic orders of the American marketplace. Although he may employ his scriveners "as a species of productive property and little else",<sup>2</sup> his attachment to his employees is overwhelmingly paternalistic and protective. On the other hand James Creech suggests that *Pierre* (published the year before 'Bartleby') is a novel preoccupied with the closeting of homosexual identity within the values of an American middle-class family, while Gregory Woods describes Melville as the nearest thing in the prose world of the American Renaissance to the Good Gay Poet Whitman. In this critical context the longevity of the relationship suggests that the lawyer-narrator's desire to know Bartleby, to protect him, to tolerate him, to be close to him, to have him for his own, and then to re-tell the story of their relationship, needs to be considered in relation to *sexual* desire.

The strength of the adhesive attachment between the two men, however, is never signalled explicitly in the text. Revelation seems closest only at the very end of the story, after Bartleby's death, when the lawyer-narrator discovers that his former scrivener once worked at the Dead Letter Office in Washington, and readily admits that he can "hardly express the emotions which seize" him.<sup>3</sup> More important, I think, is the representational status that the relationship assumes in the lawyer-narrator's imagination when he follows this admission by asking himself a somewhat confusing question: "Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men?" (45). While the literal answer to this question would be "no", it is possible to see this question as the final narrative moment in a story whose whole

dramatic development focuses around the ways in which the emotional attachment between the lawyer-narrator and Bartleby is figured through the material processes of writing, reading, and death.

I will show how central these processes are to the representation of male sexuality, but for Melville they are not separable from economic considerations. This is evident most clearly in ‘The Bachelors of Paradise and the Tartarus of Maids’ (1855) where the spermiatic rhetoric of Chapter 94 of *Moby-Dick*—‘A Squeeze of the Hand’—is transplanted to an industrial paper-mill. Looking into the pulp vats the seedsman-narrator sees they are “full of white, wet, woolly-looking stuff, not unlike the albuminous part of an egg, soft-boiled”.<sup>4</sup> It is this stuff that will eventually solidify and be turned into the paper that will help him distribute his seed across the country; its mass production will enable the growth of the paper economy upon which the world of capitalist office work is built. Bartleby shares his ‘pallid’ and ‘blank’ outlook with the maids. When the seedsman-narrator writes the name of his young male guide Cupid onto a piece of paper and drops it into the spermy pulp, and watches it travel untouched past the virginal maids through the machine to come out at the end of the process neatly incorporated into a foolscap sheet of paper, Melville is splicing together economics with gender and sexuality so that they would seem to underpin the reading and writing that are so much a part of ‘Bartleby’.

This is why the economic citadel of the office is so important in ‘Bartleby’; it is the place where the reading and writing are supposed to take place. Although the office has not been entirely overlooked in previous studies of this story, as a specific spatial site with the power to organize and structure personal and social relationships it has remained stubbornly underdeveloped, and has not been considered at all in the literary field in relation to male sexuality.<sup>5</sup> Yet one only has to consider the lawyer-narrator’s inexpressible emotion just mentioned, the importance of the screen behind which Bartleby sits in his “hermitage”, or indeed Bartleby’s refusal to explain himself in the workplace, to see that this office narrative is constructed from those pairings—public and private, surveillance and self-surveillance, disclosure and secrecy—which Eve Sedgwick has described as not only the “crucial sites for the contestation of meaning” in Western culture since the latter

part of the nineteenth century, but also all “indelibly marked with the historical specificity of homosocial/homosexual definition”.<sup>6</sup>

A useful way of thinking about ‘Bartleby’ as a product of the 1850s, then, is to think about it as a story that stands at the threshold of modern American anxiety about the crisis of male definition in capitalist culture. I want to treat ‘Bartleby’ as a tense, desire-laden tale of an ageing bachelor<sup>7</sup> who is the lawyer-narrator, and a pale, innocent young man who is his scrivener. As will become apparent, notions of visuality play a key role in my thinking and I want to pay particular attention to the lawyer, since in scopic terms the narrative is framed quite specifically through the visual logic of his recollection: “What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, that is all I know of him” (13). Surveilling past events for the lawyer-narrator means trying to read Bartleby and his relationship with him all over again to search for the meaning of the relationship as it originally occurred.

## II

The first thing to note about the office is that it is perhaps surprising that it remained outside the orbit of Foucault’s attention in his studies of surveillance and the “carceral city”, especially when one sets what he writes—that it was “the growth of a *capitalist economy* [which] gave rise to the specific modality of disciplinary power, whose general formulas ... could be operated in the most diverse political regimes, *apparatuses or institutions?*”<sup>8</sup> (my emphasis)—against the clear facts that the office and its various functions are tied so closely into capitalist development. Once it became necessary to control and finance industrialization, and once offices became the focal points for communication and the control of complexity, it was no longer tenable to run large, international concerns from the houses of merchants as it had been in the eighteenth century when administrative functions were often minimal. Only in the nineteenth century did cities begin to see the growth of specialized office quarters.<sup>9</sup> And yet although Foucault was more concerned with capitalist surveillance in factories and workshops than he was in offices, his analysis of the “imaginary geo-politics” of the carceral city with its “multiple network of diverse

elements—walls, space, institution, rules, discourse”, allows the office to be considered as in many ways the home of those new disciplines characterizing capitalist disciplinary society: supervision, assessment, visibility, the distribution of bodies in space, normalization, hierarchies of power.<sup>10</sup> The office, in its original manifestation, developed within the same logic and legacy of modernity which bequeathed a “vigilance of intersecting gazes”<sup>11</sup> to Western culture.

This development of the office was also part of one of the key features in the shift from a pre-industrial economy to a capitalist industrial economy in America: the separation of work from home. This separation, important across class divisions, was particularly important in terms of gender for middle-class businessmen and professionals, allowing each of the developing gender binaries to be allocated, via discourse, a zone in which they could legitimately operate: very generally, middle-class men in the workplace, “their” women in the home. Once men became associated with the workplace, so male identity increasingly came to be configured through work.<sup>12</sup>

The lawyer-narrator is actually a very sophisticated manager, one who despite his age is well-attuned to the requirements of surveillance in organizing subordinate staff in an office, and his narrative is organized in a similar fashion. The opening five pages of the story make evident and crucial the location of bodies in space. The detail of the description of the walled-in office, which is both poetic and meticulous, as well as again being dominated by a rhetoric of vision, continues that preoccupation with the mapping of space Melville exhibited in his sea narratives.<sup>13</sup>

It is with the arrival of Bartleby, however, that the incoherence of this nominally well-organized office space becomes apparent. After being forced to explain how the office is actually split in two and separated by folding, ground- glass doors,<sup>14</sup> the lawyer-narrator makes two linked responses, both crucial to the development of the story. He first of all describes Bartleby as “motionless ... pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn”—adjectives and adverbs which register him in a role of passivity—but then also embarks upon a vital further demarcation of the office space. Despite thinking that Bartleby’s “sedate aspect ... might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey, and the

fiery one of Nippers”, Bartleby is actually given a desk behind a screen in the lawyer-narrator’s part of the office. With Bartleby isolated from his sight but not his voice, so, according to the lawyer-narrator, “privacy and society were conjoined” (19).

Several things are apparent here: the phonocentric conjugation of voice with society; the failure of the lawyer-narrator (tellingly) to adduce whose privacy it is he thinks he is preserving (it can’t be his own since while he can intrude behind the screen with his voice any time he chooses, Bartleby can also step out from behind the screen without knocking whenever *he* chooses); the admission that space cannot be marked by screens or doors but is more contingent than that and can be infinitely reassessed; and the lawyer-narrator’s disavowing logic which wants Bartleby to control his other employees whilst keeping him all to himself in his side of the office. Two classes of space produced so meticulously—in the office, in the lawyer-narrator’s narrative—suddenly collapse into one another upon the arrival of Bartleby whilst, once more disavowingly, the lawyer-narrator tries to demarcate them syntactically. By the admission that privacy and society, the private and the public, are proximate at the level of being internal to one another, and through this increasing demarcation of his office, the lawyer-narrator is actually destabilizing the very coherence of the project he is professing. The consequences of this process will result in him having to keep on classifying and separating in this manner until he reaches a stage—which he does later in the narrative—where the incoherence of his strategy becomes clear to him (and its link to male sexuality transparent) and he is forced to re-order—both his office and sexuality, his attachment to Bartleby—through the ultimate rejection and the ultimate disavowal. This is the crisis which Bartleby provokes in the lawyer-narrator and which the lawyer-narrator is only able to piece together in his retrospective narrative, his re-ordering of events connected to Bartleby.<sup>15</sup> It is in the scopic frame of his narrative of Bartleby where he has to confront his own self and where he recognizes what thus far he has been passing over or misrecognizing: that his identity as a man in the masculine and public world of work and patriarchy cannot permit the desire he has for Bartleby or other men to be vectored through sex.

As a way of explaining in more detail how the office and its surveillance strategies impact on this realm of male sexuality, however, I think Foucault's argument that the body becomes the site on which disciplinary power plays itself out<sup>16</sup> is insufficient in the light of the emphasis I place on the regime of the visual and needs to be supplemented by some more recent developments in thinking about male sexuality.

Lee Edelman has written how the imperative to produce homosexual difference as a determinate entity in the twentieth century and before has often relied on "reading" the body as a textual "signifier of sexual orientation".<sup>17</sup> As well as having been positioned in such a proscriptive relation to language—*peccatum illud horribile, inter christianos non nominandum*—homosexuality and homosexual men, along with their bodies, their clothes, gestures, language, certain buildings and public places of meeting, have always been positioned so that they are intimately related to questions of visibility and legibility. And especially so once it began to be assumed by the discourses of eighteenth and nineteenth century Western culture that a subject's relation to sexuality and desire was essential rather than contingent.<sup>18</sup> But at the same time as the homosexual man comes to be distinctively marked, becomes a text, it must also be possible for those hallmarks which distinguish him to pass unremarked, Edelman argues. So that

... heterosexuality has ... been able to reinforce the status of its own authority as 'natural' (i.e. unmarked, authentic, and non-representational) by defining the straight body against the 'threat' of an 'unnatural' homosexuality—a 'threat' the more effectively mobilized by generating concern about homosexuality's unnerving ... capacity to 'pass,' to remain invisible, in order to call into being a variety of disciplinary 'knowledges' through which homosexuality might be recognized, exposed, and ultimately rendered, more ominously, invisible once more.<sup>19</sup>

For Edelman this entry of homosexuality into the field of writing and textuality is the first thing his theory of homographesis denotes. But this writing of homosexuality is



reliant upon a second order of visibility, where there is “the need to construe such an emblem of homosexual difference that will securely situate that difference within the register of visibility”.<sup>20</sup> Such an emblem is effeminacy,<sup>21</sup> which increasingly comes to be the interchangeable with homosexuality—especially as sexuality becomes more tightly linked with gender ideology.<sup>22</sup>

Under these conditions male sexuality becomes susceptible to two different and completely discontinuous readings—heterosexual and homosexual. While the necessity of a visual marker to separate them out is compelling—since they must exist in the symbolic order of sexuality in the same way that gender difference does—the necessity of creating “homosexual difference” and “the homosexual” actually impacts upon all male identities because one has to read all male identities (and, of course, one’s own male identity) to see whether they exhibit the hallmark of sexual difference; it textualizes all male identity and requires that all male identity be “read”. The putting into writing of homosexual difference, then, also puts into writing the essentialized nature of identity, the result being—and this is the second thing that Edelman’s theory of homographesis denotes—the deconstruction, or de-scription, of a metaphorical notion of identity, and the consequent deconstruction of the binary logic of sameness and difference upon which symbolic identity is based.

Edelman’s position clearly suggests the centrality of a scopic constituent for the organization of male sexuality in modernity. Going further than Edelman, I want to make explicit that the links here with surveillance become increasingly irresistible. What I want to argue is that Foucauldian surveillance is actually a sophisticated form of reading and that this reading is potently implicated in that manoeuvre whereby the male subject needs to be positioned in one of two increasingly discontinuous and hierarchically organized identities during the course of the nineteenth century—the homo and the hetero--where the boundary between these two needs to be policed constantly. And it is policed by the continuance of reading and surveillance;<sup>23</sup> by the entangled methods of regulation and deconstruction identified in Edelman’s theory of homographesis.

In a similar vein, Jonathan Dollimore has identified how sexual contact between men as it has variously been signified through Western history—as sin, as vice, as

unnatural, as crime—has carried with it a contradictory metaphysics of evil which has its roots in an Augustinian theology which places sexual perversion as a corruption of good that stands in subordinate but proximate relation to the dominant. This means that it is only possible to conceptualize evil *through* good. Dollimore identifies two kinds of relation which result:

First: those proximities will permanently remind the dominant of its actual instability, all forms of domination being unstable to a varying degree, as well as produce a paranoid fear of impending subversion. So there will be both a justified fear as well as an excess of fear; second, that proximity will become the means enabling displacement and projection, while the justified/paranoid fears will be their motivation: proximity becomes a condition of displacement; which in turn marks the same/proximate as radically other.<sup>24</sup>

Here is why male-male sexual contact, whilst socially marginalized, has retained its central symbolic function in Western society. This metaphysical order is played out in the social and the cultural. The proximate is internal and yet has to be made “radically other” in an/other space. As the lawyer-narrator says, if Bartleby had admitted to having any friends or relatives, “I would instantly have written, and urged their taking the poor fellow away to some convenient retreat” (32).

Put simply, then, my argument is that the development of the visual regime of the office and the development of the twin categories of homo and hetero in the nineteenth century, whilst they may simply coincide in temporal terms, are definitely not coincidental in the sense of having an arbitrary relationship. The office, a surveilling regime constructed from those discursive pairings so crucial in the development of the epistemology of modern Western sexuality, facilitates a reading regime which works to re-inscribe these discursive pairings. If it appears that this argument suggests that the office is organized solely in terms of sex then I should make it clear that this is not what I am arguing. Clearly

surveillance in capitalism serves other purposes, such as class control and the construction of the bourgeois subject. And yet these categories are not separate from the work of surveillance and the construction of sexuality. Whilst the office may be the site where many forms of capitalist surveillance takes place, it is also not a site which excludes particular kinds of surveillance. If the binary of work and home is an incoherent one, then so must be the boundary which tries to secure for the workplace exclusive rights to a surveillance which is only about class and capitalism. Especially in a story like 'Bartleby' which is so concerned with the emotional attachment between two men.

I think that Edelman's and Dollimore's work can join together at this point to help throw light on the development of the story in 'Bartleby' as I have already described it, but more importantly that they help in an analysis of what subsequently happens to the lawyer-narrator and the way that he manages the desire which only increases as Bartleby refuses to do what he asks of him.

### III

Bartleby's initial refusal is a refusal to read, and whilst this means that Bartleby is not doing the job for which he is being paid, in a disciplinary regime of surveillance and self-surveillance the refusal to read—whether it be one's position in one's surroundings, the surveilling gaze, oneself—is an act which threatens more than just profits and efficiency. Likewise, in a regime where the reading of other men is becoming vital to the consolidation of identity within a gender, Bartleby's stance is particularly disturbing. Quite literally, Bartleby refuses to read himself in public; that is, he refuses to speak about himself in public: "he had declined telling who he was, or whence he came, or whether he had any relatives in the world" (28). Unplaced as a man, the placing, the reading, is all left to the lawyer-narrator. However, in the process of inscribing Bartleby in some of the ways I have already mentioned, ways which place his strange mysteriousness and his unknowability in direct relation to those rhetorical structures which will later come to denote an effeminate homosexuality<sup>25</sup> (ways which the whole retrospective narrative of re-remembrance, re-constitution and general hindsight of the narrative key into), the lawyer-narrator actually

participates in the second stage of Edelman's notion of homographesis, the de-scription of any potentially metaphorical or fixed nature of male identity.

This reversal of the lawyer-narrator's surveilling gaze begins almost immediately. Bartleby refuses to read: "there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely *disarmed me*, but in a wonderful manner touched and *disconcerted me*" (21, my emphasis). Bartleby's refusal, instead of reflecting Bartleby back to the lawyer-narrator, actually makes the lawyer-narrator contemplate himself. The lawyer-narrator disavowingly convinces himself of Bartleby's usefulness to him. Not throwing him out becomes protecting him from a potentially less sympathetic employer. "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" (23-4). Of course what it means also is that the lawyer-narrator can keep Bartleby close to him; Bartleby is successfully internalized not just by the spatial organization of the lawyer-narrator's side of the office but in the rhetorical manoeuvre which means that Bartleby is somehow literally inside the lawyer-narrator, an ingested "sweet morsel". So desperate is the lawyer-narrator to maintain Bartleby in his employ that he allows him all sorts of "strange peculiarities, privileges, and unheard of exemptions" which soon the lawyer-narrator becomes used to, so much so that "every added repulse ... which I received only tended to lessen the probability of my repeating the inadvertence" (26).

This inversion or role reversal is continued during the lawyer-narrator's Sunday morning visit to his office. When he finds Bartleby "saying quietly that he was sorry that he was deeply engaged just then, and—preferred not admitting me at present" (26), the lawyer-narrator is the one who is forced into the position of having to "knock" to enter his own premises. Not only this. Bartleby, having made a home out of the office, has collapsed the home/work and public/private separation. He has domesticated the office. Which also means feminizing it. The lawyer-narrator walks away, disconcerted by the way that Bartleby's "wonderful mildness ... not only disarmed me, but unmanned me, as it were. 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" (27). So, the

lawyer-narrator is unmanned by not being able to control his employees, and unmanned by having his office domesticated. But he is also unmanned too, surely, by the rhetoric of penetration in Bartleby's refusal to admit him, to allow him to take that active position in the active/passive binary of sexual contact. Here one can see the classification of gender division beginning to affect relations between men. It is Bartleby's passiveness—a description reinforced over and over in the story—his “wonderful mildness”, which is unmanning the lawyer-narrator. It bespeaks a manning which is susceptible to that second denotation of homographesis, the de-description of a masculine male identity.

When the lawyer-narrator returns to the office and embarks upon the most thorough investigation of Bartleby in his absence, identifying each of his meagre belongings, and through them his “miserable friendlessness and loneliness”, (27) he recognizes the fraternal relationship which bonds him to Bartleby, and which leads him “on to other and more special thoughts, concerning the eccentricities of Bartleby. Presentiments of strange discoveries hovered around me” (28). Considering the internalized state in which Bartleby exists for the lawyer-narrator, and considering the points I made in the previous paragraph about penetration, unmanning, and the instability of male identity, the nature of these “special thoughts” and “strange discoveries” would seem to be tied up intimately with this desire the lawyer-narrator is directing towards Bartleby.

What follows is the lawyer-narrator's intrusion into Bartleby's locked desk. This is a key moment in determining the lawyer-narrator's attitude towards Bartleby and one which has been prepared for quite thoroughly by the narrative. This moment needs to be read in the context of the lawyer-narrator having walked away from his office “incontinently”<sup>26</sup> when Bartleby refused him entry; in the context of Nippers's chronic indigestion and the references to nuts and spices and the capitalist emphasis upon bodily regularity and control connected to the time-clock of discipline; in the context of a phallic thematics of disarming; in the context of the lawyer-narrator having noted earlier that the “the interval between this [outside] wall and mine not a little resembled a huge square cistern” (14); in the context of a scopic regime of private and public and their importance in the male

washroom—which is what the lawyer-narrator’s office effectively becomes next to this cistern—when the urinal and the cubicle allow, respectively, the display of the phallus in public and the loosening of the sphincter in private.<sup>27</sup> In the light of all this, when the lawyer-narrator intrudes into the desk the presence of an anal thematics becomes unmistakable. Indeed, this link between the desk and the anus has been made directly, because the reader has been told already that Nippers’s struggle to accommodate his too tightly controlled sphincter is dramatized by his inability to find a comfortable height for his desk (16-17). In the desk

Every thing was methodically arranged, the papers smoothly placed. The pigeon holes were deep, and removing the files of documents, I groped into their recesses. Presently I felt something there, and dragged it out. It was an old bandanna handkerchief, heavy and knotted. I opened it, and saw it was a savings bank” (28).<sup>28</sup>

For the lawyer-narrator it is this extraction of coins from Bartleby’s desk/anus which leads to the clearest moment of surveillance of Bartleby, the moment when the lawyer-narrator recalls “all the quiet mysteries which I had noted in the man” (28). This passage of revelation is worth quoting at length:

Revolving all these things, and coupling them with the recently discovered fact that he made my office his constant abiding place and home, and not forgetful of his morbid moodiness; revolving all these things, a prudential feeling began to steal over me. My first emotions had been those of pure melancholy and sincerest pity; but just in proportion as the forlornness of Bartleby grew and grew to my imagination, did that same melancholy merge into fear, that pity into repulsion. So true it is, and so terrible too, that up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but, in certain special cases, beyond that point it does not. They err who would

assert that invariably this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart. It rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill. To a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul be rid of it. What I saw that morning persuaded me that the scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder. I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach (29).

What is so tempting about this passage is that moment when the lawyer-narrator sees his “melancholy merge into fear” and his “pity into repulsion”. In the light of Dollimore’s ideas, what appears to be happening here is that the lawyer-narrator is fulfilling that manoeuvre his marking of difference in *Bartleby* has been moving towards. He is marking “the same/proximate as radically other.” The melancholy and the pity which so connected him to *Bartleby* that *Bartleby* became internal to him now suddenly are transformed—how exactly does melancholy merge *into* fear, pity *into* repulsion?—into the fear and repulsion which will help him to paranoically separate himself completely from *Bartleby*. Following Dollimore and Edelman, the lawyer-narrator’s very proximity to *Bartleby* is the reason for this fear and repulsion; it is the proximity caused by evil being internal to good, and by de-scription being implicated in the process of inscription which relies so heavily on the never stable visual register. The impossibility of any separation haunts the lawyer-narrator: “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? This apprehension had not been without efficacy in determining me to summary measures” (31).

The summary measures the lawyer-narrator decides upon are, of course, to fulfil his final separation from *Bartleby*. The lawyer-narrator, so culpable in first differentiating *Bartleby* by spatial surveillance, so culpable in opening up *Bartleby* to a surveilling gaze, so culpable in internalizing *Bartleby* in his own male identity, is now paying the spatial

consequences, the consequences of a logic which tries to have as separate and external what is so proximate and internal. How can one separate oneself from that upon which one relies to be oneself? The lawyer-narrator is forced to do something once he realizes that Bartleby is “scandalizing my professional reputation ... I resolved to gather all my faculties together, and for ever rid me of this intolerable incubus” (38). He moves his chambers and Bartleby is eventually removed to the Tombs where he dies fairly soon after. And it is here that the lawyer-narrator’s asks his confusing question: “Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men?”

#### IV

One of the features of the Dead Letter Office, and of the dead letters that would have reached it, was a breakdown in communication. The letters are deprived of their intended reader and are read instead by someone to whom they mean something different. The reader of the letters is the same—a reader—but different—not the intended reader—and the content of the letter consequently fails to “mean” because of context. When asking himself about the similarity of dead letters and dead men, the lawyer-narrator is, I suggest, referencing the reading of men by other men, and the likelihood that, as with the letters whose meaning is contextual, so it is with men in the environment of the office and of work. Relationships between men are now beginning to carry the weight of reading and recognition and, conscious of this, men now need to display a meaning—masculine, active, solid—which will be read and understood in this context so that it will reach its intended receiver. Through his question the lawyer-narrator appears to be suggesting that Bartleby fails to do this. In the world of office work he has displayed all the wrong letters and has consequently been read out of context. Of course the lawyer-narrator knows exactly the context in which these letters should have been read: the context of male-male relations that permit sexual contact. And he knows because he recognizes that these letters are the ones internal and proximate to his own identity which relies upon the disavowal of them and of male-male sexual contact. He reads Bartleby and himself clearly enough, only then



to consign the letters which make up Bartleby to the Dead Letter Office. He reads then disavows, claims not to understand.

The greatest paradox of all, though, lies in the fact that it is the lawyer-narrator himself who has been responsible for inscribing all these letters in Bartleby in the first place. He is the one responsible for visualizing and writing the narrative of Bartleby. In effect, the lawyer-narrator has written a letter to himself which he can consign to the Dead Letter Office once he has disavowed so successfully that he can satisfy himself he does not understand the content, and therefore that the message does not really apply to him. This manoeuvre is reinforced by the enigmatic way in which the whole story of Bartleby is told by the lawyer-narrator. He tries to forget his reactions to Bartleby through the sublimation of his feelings of desire into the rhetoric which shapes the story: the damaging divisions of private/public, surveillance/self-surveillance and secrecy/disclosure which underpin the link between such a phrase in the story as “hardly can I express the emotions which seized me” and others like “strangely disarmed”, “special thoughts”, “strange discoveries”, and “our best affections”.

That these divisions are understood by the lawyer-narrator himself to be damaging is witnessed by the way in which it is possible to read in Melville’s story a meditation on the consequence of this whole process of surveillance, the marking of difference, and disavowal—namely death. Indeed, Robert K. Martin has observed that Melville was unable “to imagine what it might have been like for two men to love each other *and survive*”.<sup>29</sup> Bartleby dies as a direct consequence of the lawyer-narrator’s quest to be rid of that which is proximate and which is made radically other. It is the fracturing of male identity into radically discontinuous classes of sexuality which one can see beginning to take place in Bartleby and which will become more intense as the century goes on and which Melville himself will dramatize so forcefully in *Billy Budd*. The results of this kind of epistemological organizing of identity are literally fatal. If dead letters sound like dead men then dead men sound worryingly like dead letters; immediately identifiable but instantly made different and disavowed, it is the men who are made to bear the letters of their identity so visibly who end up suffering Bartleby’s fate.

## Notes

1. As far as antebellum economic change is concerned see Louise K. Barnett, 'Bartleby as Alienated Worker', *Studies in Short Fiction*, 11 (1974), 379-85; Stephen Zelnich, 'Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener": A Study in History, Ideology, and Literature', *Marxist Perspectives*, 2 (1979-80) 74-92; David Kuebrich, 'Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in "Bartleby"', *New England Quarterly* 69:3 (1996), 381-405. For male sexuality see Robert K. Martin, *Hero, Captain, and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville*, (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994 [1990]), 91-130; James Creech, *Closet Writing/Gay Reading: The Case of Melville's Pierre* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993); Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 163-66.
2. Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 135.
3. 'Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street', in Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839-1860* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1987), 45. All further references to this text appear in parentheses.
4. Melville, 'The Bachelors of Paradise and the Tartarus of Maids', in *The Piazza Tales*, 331.
5. The most interesting comment on the office to date remains see Leo Marx, 'Melville's Parable of the Walls', *Sewanee Review*, 61 (1953), 602-27.
6. Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 72.
7. For more on the mid-century bachelor, his place in American urban sexual culture, and spermatorrhoea see Vincent J. Bertolini, 'Fireside Chastity: The Erotics of Sentimental Bachelorhood in the 1850s', *American Literature* 68:4 (1996) 707-37.
8. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991 [1977]), 221.
9. This information is taken from Peter Cowan et. al., *The Office: a facet of urban growth* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1969), 25-29. The subtitle of 'Bartleby'—'A

Story of Wall Street’—clearly ties it into this growing specialized office and administrative world. For the way in which American business became more and more office-based and more and more an economy based upon management after 1840, see Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1977). For a detailed treatment of the relationship of Karl Marx, Max Weber, as well as Foucault, to questions of surveillance see Christopher Dandeker, *Surveillance, Power and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).

10. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 306-7.

11. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 217.

12. See E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), especially 167-93 and 194-221. Rotundo identifies the growing importance of work and the workplace as one of the two revolutions in thinking about masculinity in the last two hundred years, the other being the association of masculinity with aggression, combativeness and sexual desire, all of which of course are implicated in question of homo/hetero definition. For a discussion of the contradictions and complicated effects of this public/private gender organization, see Glenna Matthews, *The Rise of Public Woman: Woman's Power and Woman's Place in the United States 1630-1970* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). For particular attention to the office, see pp. 119-50. As this shift impacted on male homosocial desire and on the role of women in the family in Britain, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 134-60.

13. Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 110-14.

14. Ground glass permits light to pass through it but allows no direct, unobstructed gaze. It therefore fulfils two objectives at the same time: it institutes a code of visibility in the whole office, whilst ensuring that the workers have hidden from their eyes the inspector who may be watching them. Clear glass could not achieve this; neither could it achieve the construction of privacy for the lawyer-narrator.

15. For a more detailed explanation of this idea of retrospective re-ordering and its implications for questions of male sexuality, see Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 173-91.
16. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990 [1978]), especially 48 and 139-40.
17. Lee Edelman, *Homographesis*, 4.
18. This was the transition from the moment when sodomy as a discontinuous act did not necessarily preclude other forms of sexual relations, to the moment when the homosexual became a distinct category of person. This is the thesis as set out by Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, and subsequently reinforced to varying degrees by Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodomities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), Ed Cohen, *A Talk on the Wilde Side* (New York: Routledge, 1993), and Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century* (London: Cassell, 1994). Goldberg is also keen to point out the importance of the continuation of the terminology of sodomy in the modern period. For a more sceptical approach to the chronology upon which Foucault's work insists see Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London: Gay Men's Press 1982), but more particularly Rictor Norton, *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual* (London: Cassell, 1997). I take the view that the medicalized and psychologized shifts in attitudes towards homo/sexuality that occur in the second half of the nineteenth century—and they clearly do—are part of the same disciplinary and classificatory project outlined by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* and *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Pantheon, 1970) and which stretches back into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The crucial point about the end of the nineteenth century, I believe, has been made by Sedgwick: 'What was new from the turn of the century was the world-mapping by which every given person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to a male or a female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable as well to a homo- or a hetero-sexuality'. Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 2. As far as my argument is concerned, I see 'Bartleby' as existing in a zone of discourse where the metaphoric and metonymic approaches to identity—reductive as

these categories are—are woven tightly together, and hence my concentration on the text as standing at the threshold of developments that were to follow.

19. Edelman, *Homographesis*, 6.
20. Edelman, *Homographesis*, 11.
21. Whilst as a cultural phenomenon effeminacy has a long history, the relationship between effeminacy and same-sex passion has generated considerable discussion. Randolph Trumbach has made a case for the early eighteenth century as the time when effeminacy came to be seen as a marker of sodomy between men, especially in subcultural environments, but Alan Sinfield has suggested that ‘Up to the time of the Wilde trials—far later than is widely supposed—it is unsafe to interpret effeminacy as defining of, or as a signal of, same-sex passion’, *The Wilde Century*, 27. See Randolph Trumbach, ‘Sodomitical Subcultures, sodomitical roles, and the gender revolution of the eighteenth century: the recent historiography’, in Robert Purks Maccubin, ed., *This Nature’s Fault*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Trumbach, ‘Gender and the modern homosexual role in western culture: the 18th and 19th centuries compared’, in Denis Altman et. al., *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?*, (London: Gay Men’s Press, 1989). What seems apparent is that effeminacy and same-sex passion are intricately related to notions of gender in western culture and it might be that one cannot discuss homosexuality and effeminacy without discussing the cultural discourses defining gender divisions. This is Edelman’s approach.
22. Edelman, *Homographesis*, 11. For the way that the discourse of sex actually contributed towards the development of gender binarism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Thomas Lacquer, *Making Sex* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1992 [1990]). This equation of sex-organizing-gender-organizing-sexuality is one which remains underexplored theoretically.
23. This emphasis on the visual nature of society since the Renaissance is mapped out by Martin Jay’s *Downcast Eyes* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993), chapters 1 and 2. The subtitle of the book, *The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* refers to the way in which French thinkers have

criticised the effects of this emphasis on vision and presented anti-ocular discourses. For the increasing interest in visual technologies and phenomena, and the importance of vision as a discourse in the nineteenth century, see Daniel Pick, 'Stories of the Eye', in Roy Porter, ed., *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1997), 186-99; Suren Lalvani, *Photography, Vision, and the Production of Modern Bodies* (New York, State University of New York Press, 1996); and Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

24. Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 141. Original in italics.
25. Many of the descriptions of Bartleby make an anachronistic reading of him as 'homosexual' quite possible because of the way in which in the twentieth century these descriptions hint at those markers which have become related to a particular style of tragic, upper class, effeminate homosexuality. I list them here in the order they appear in the story: strangest (13), motionless, pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn, sedate (19), silently, palely, leanly composed (20), flute-like tone (22), involuntary, strange wilfulness (23), passiveness (24), lean, penniless weight (25), great stillness, unalterableness of demeanour, strangely tattered dishabille (26), cadaverously gentlemanly nonchalance, wonderful mildness, dismantled condition, decorous (27), pallid, pallid haughtiness, austere reserve (28), morbid moodiness, forlornness (29), calm disdain, perverseness, mildly cadaverous (30), afflictive (32), mute and solitary (33) strange creature (38), apparition, intolerable incubus, poor, pale, passive mortal, helpless creature, innocent pallor (38).
26. The Oxford English Dictionary provides three definitions of 'incontinence':
  1. Lack of restraint with regard to sexual desire; promiscuity. LME
  2. Med. Lack of voluntary control over the passing of urine or faeces. (Foll. by of.) M18.
  3. gen. Lack of constraint; inability to contain or restrain. (Foll. by of.) M19.

My reading of this section of 'Bartleby' clearly suggests a link, then, between the first and second definitions.

27. See Lee Edelman, *Homographesis*, 148-70, and Lee Edelman, 'Men's Room', in Joel Sanders, ed., *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 152-61.
28. For a more detailed reading of the link between money and anality, see Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 161-79.
29. Martin, *Hero, Captain and Stranger*, 7.