For a few short weeks, “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street” was a piece of anonymous magazine fiction. The first installment appeared toward the end of the November 1853 issue of Putnam’s Monthly Magazine and was just one of the many other anonymous poems, stories, essays, and reviews making up that issue. By the time the second and final installment was published in December 1853, however, The Literary World had revealed Melville as the author of this “Poe-ish tale.” Thereafter, the lawyer and his copying clerk move beyond the bounds of the magazine world. Reprinted simply as “Bartleby” with four of Melville’s other Putnam’s stories in The Piazza Tales (1856), the seriality and full title of the magazine version were lost as Melville’s authorship was formally instituted. Continually reproduced and anthologized as a freestanding short story in the wake of Melville’s canonization during the twentieth century, “Bartleby” has become a milestone for any understanding of Melville’s authorial persona. As a consequence, Putnam’s Monthly attracts little more attention in the vast expanse of “Bartleby” criticism than the object to which the magazine compared itself in its very first editorial of January 1853: a “speck of star dust” in “the celestial dairy” of America. But what would it mean to reconnect the most famous and widely read of Melville’s short stories to the magazines of the 1850s? And what does it mean to read “Bartleby” as magazine fiction?

Some questions often asked of the story might become less important. Who is Bartleby, why does he “prefer not to,” why does the lawyer not dispense with him more quickly, and how should Bartleby’s death be interpreted? Questions of this nature have preoccupied two dominant approaches to the story. The first tries to identify the literary and historical sources on which “Bartleby” is based. Because of his preference for refusal, Bartleby has been read as the Thoreau of “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849) and often biographically as Melville himself as he became alienated from writing and publishing after the commercial failures of Moby-Dick (1851) and Pierre (1852). Melville’s friend and traveling companion Eli Fly, who worked as
a scrivener in the office of Melville’s uncle before being invalided and then dying in 1854, also bears striking resemblances to Bartleby. The lawyer has been read as Melville’s early supporter and later critic, journalist and writer Evert Duyckinck; as Melville’s father-in-law, lawyer Lemuel Shaw; and as the Hawthorne ejected from public office just like the lawyer-narrator of “Bartleby” who loses his position as Master in Chancery. Specific historical references in the story – to John Jacob Astor, the Colt and Adams murder, and the Dead Letter Office – have all been followed up as potential keys to unlock the story’s ambiguities. Meanwhile, the story’s literary debts have been traced to Irving, to Poe, or more specifically to the legal fictions of Dickens’s *Bleak House* or James Maitland’s *The Lawyer’s Story*, both of which were published before “Bartleby.”

If this first approach emphasizes biographical and literary sources, the second treats Bartleby the character and “Bartleby” the story as symptomatic of broader changes shaping mid-nineteenth-century America. This approach has dominated “Bartleby” criticism since the 1970s. The Wall Street location of the lawyer’s office is invoked to establish a context of capitalism, class, and labor where the lawyer is caught between being patron and employer with Bartleby as his alienated employee. The specters of capitalism, particularly the labor activism that sparked New York’s Astor Place riot of 1849, are seen more generally to haunt the text. Other discourses by which modernity is now understood are also seen to permeate the story. The concentration in New York City of emerging industries of cultural consumption and production re-enliven the context of Melville’s writerly alienation and its encoding in his scrivener. Considerations of autism and disability produce a medicalized version of “Bartleby,” while the bonds of attachment between the lawyer and Bartleby can be understood in the light of the historical development of structures of gender and sexuality. The hermeneutic density of the text, and the challenge this presents to the act of interpretation itself, also means that “Bartleby” frequently occupies critical theorists. In the most recent incarnation of this approach, Branka Arsić suggests Bartleby now ranks alongside Oedipus, Hamlet, and Don Quixote; all are characters who “announce a different way of thinking” and thus “remain unthinkable” within the confines of our own knowledge.

If Arsić is right, then questions about Bartleby’s identity, his refusal to check or copy legal documents, and the lawyer’s hesitancy in dispensing with his services or his personal fate will resist definitive answers. These unanswered questions are part of the pleasure of the text and reason enough to keep readers and critics returning to “Bartleby”; but the story one now reads in the light of these critical contexts is not the story published in *Putnam’s Monthly*. Both source and symptom criticism prioritize
textuality over the contingencies of magazine writing and publishing. From these critical perspectives, “Bartleby” is a story one reads through the prism of its sources or a story that is itself the prism through which one reads the contextual factors shaping its form and content. That “Bartleby” was magazine fiction does not matter when it is read as parable or synecdoche because the emphasis is on revealing meaning through textual reference and allusion, and not by way of that story’s coming to publication in Putnam’s Monthly. A story, however, need not only be a text whose form and content are subject to interpretation following publication; it can also be a material object that bears witness to the circumstances by which it comes into publication. To read “Bartleby” as magazine fiction is to see meaning emerge in the connection of thinking, writing, and publication rather than through a symptomatic relation of text to source or context.

The sequence of events by which “Bartleby” became part of the magazine world can be put into relief by thinking about the matrix in which Melville’s writing was embedded from the very beginning of his literary career. Although he published two short pieces in the Democratic Press, and Lansingburgh Advertiser in May 1839, Melville was not driven to write by long-standing literary ambition. After listening to the tales of his adventures at sea, it was his family and friends who encouraged him to write down these stories. In hindsight it may be difficult to imagine Melville not becoming a writer after this point, but this did not stop him from stumbling into print. No publisher had asked Melville for a book. When he did produce the manuscript of Typee in 1845, it was rejected by Harper’s of New York: not as good as the most famous of castaway narratives, Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, it was also considered too fantastic to be true. Melville had to rely on his brother Gansevoort to secure publication. When he was posted to London as a diplomat, Gansevoort took the only copy of the manuscript with him. He found a British publisher and, after reading sections to Washington Irving during a breakfast meeting, also managed to secure American publication with Wiley & Putnam, the latter partner – George Palmer Putnam – being responsible subsequently for Putnam’s Monthly Magazine.

Typee came to publication only when two factors were in place: first, some impetus turned ideas and stories into material form; second, a network of aesthetic judgment, special interest, and economic decision making was already established in which the manuscript could circulate. Writers have first to write before they can be read, and Melville had to translate the oral performances witnessed by his friends and family into a written narrative. The linguistic, temporal, and physical differences between telling and writing a story make this a significant undertaking. Not all good storytellers make good writers, and entertaining one’s family over the course of an
evening is a very different task to spending six months writing a manuscript for an unknown public. Melville also took *Typee* to Harper’s in recognition of the book’s imitative rather than its unique qualities. Harper’s had already published, with some success, Richard Henry Dana’s autobiographical sea narrative, *Two Years before the Mast* (1840), a book Melville read and admired. The generic qualities of *Typee* – “if not as good as Robinson Crusoe … not far behind it”\(^1\) – ensured a favorable reader’s report from Harper’s; being too much like fiction and deviating from generic norms meant Harper’s rejected the manuscript. The question of authenticity was a concern for the British publisher, John Murray, although he overcame his doubts. For George Palmer Putnam, the word of Washington Irving was recommendation enough.

Material and publishing prehistories of this sort can seem like antiquarian details alongside the gravity texts or writers assume in their later cultural existence. But in the journey of a literary text, being read by the public is just one of the events triggered by its writing and circulation. The contingencies of the events themselves – how the endeavor of writing proceeds practically following friendly encouragement; the precarious transatlantic voyage of a unique manuscript; how a well-connected brother leverages his contacts; and so on – create a very different orientation of text to meaning than would be available by prioritizing formal or contextual readings of *Typee*. Contingent events can even add to the later literary evaluations of a work. For example, Melville’s representation in *Typee* of the contact between white and nonwhite, “civilized” and “savage,” appears of secondary importance if one concentrates on the novel’s publishing prehistory. But racial and cultural difference propel Melville to write in the first place. It was tales of exotic encounter rather than anything else about his time at sea that Melville’s friends and family suggest he turn into fiction. And his British and American publishers understood there was a market for material of this kind. Even before we get to interpreting a text, the decision to write and the coming to publication of a manuscript is freighted with meaning.

The same holds true for “Bartleby,” albeit in a different set of publishing circumstances. While *Typee* was written speculatively, Melville knew he was writing “Bartleby” for a magazine. In late 1852, George Palmer Putnam was on the verge of realizing his ambition to produce a quality monthly magazine on the back of his successful book publishing business. While periodicals had been a feature of literary life in Europe and America for several decades, they were growing in number in the 1840s and 1850s because of the development of a print culture taking advantage of mechanical advances in papermaking and printing, faster transportation networks, healthy literacy rates, and expanding and diversifying demand from educated
urban consumers. Putnam composed a letter soliciting contributions from the authors he considered “the best talent of the country to aid us in the undertaking.”\footnote{14} The list was long, upward of 200, and included Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Thoreau, and Cooper as well as Melville. In targeting writers of this stature, as well as American writers who have long since dropped off the literary radar, Putnam signaled his intention to print original, American contributions. This was in contrast to one of the new magazine’s main competitors, \textit{Harper’s Monthly Magazine}, which had been running since June 1850 and was known for printing imported British material alongside pieces often reprinted from other American sources.

Harper’s and Putnam’s, then, took their competition in the book market into the world of magazines. Melville was already bound up in this economic market. After the success of \textit{Typee}, Harper’s published Melville’s subsequent novels. So when he received the letter from Putnam, Melville found himself in a position where both of the publishers of his fiction now had magazines for which they wanted him to write. Although he had written reviews and short pieces, mainly for Duyckinck’s \textit{Literary World}, Melville had not yet taken on the tale or short story. In debt to Harper’s after poor sales of his books, and following the rejection by Harper’s of his now lost novel, \textit{The Isle of the Cross}, he faced the prospect of becoming a magazine writer to stabilize his career and his finances.

In a letter to Hawthorne drafted while he was writing \textit{Moby-Dick}, Melville famously declared that “Dollars damn me! … What I feel most moved to write, that is banned, – it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the \textit{other} way I cannot” (\textit{L} 191). This has become a convenient shorthand for identifying Melville’s dissatisfaction with the demands of the literary market. But the comment should be understood in the context of his finishing the writing of that large and difficult novel. When it came to writing for magazines, Melville proved he could in fact “write the \textit{other} way.” He set himself to this task in the spring and summer of 1853 as he wrote three stories for \textit{Harper’s Monthly} as well as “Bartleby.” Hershel Parker has noted that Melville “picked himself up stoutly” when faced with the prospect of writing for magazines and not with his “characteristic recklessness.”\footnote{15} Melville was certainly familiar with the form and content of magazines. He subscribed to \textit{Harper’s Monthly} and even in his letter to Hawthorne mentions having read Hawthorne’s “The Unpardonable Sin” in \textit{Dollar Magazine}. Magazines were not a mystery to Melville; he understood their conventions in the same way he understood the conventions of the sea fiction and travel narratives he embraced so successfully in his early books. Having pushed the form of the novel to the point of collapse in \textit{Moby-Dick} and \textit{Pierre}, a task he would take up again in \textit{The Confidence-Man} (1857), meeting the demands of writing
magazine fiction required that Melville adopt a much more pragmatic approach. In his response to this challenge and the coming to publication of “Bartleby” in *Putnam’s Monthly*, it is possible to see a story with qualities very different from the ones often seen by later readers and critics. Although hard to imagine now as just an ordinary story, “Bartleby” first declared itself to the world in quite an ordinary way.

The nature of this ordinariness, suggested by the anonymity of its publication and the location of the first installment toward the end of the magazine, is better understood if one pushes the story back against some of the sources often claimed as influences. The most obvious to consider is James Maitland’s *The Lawyer’s Story*, the first chapter of which appeared in the New York *Tribune* and *New York Times* of February 18, 1853. “In the summer of 1843,” Maitland’s tale begins, “having an extraordinary quantity of deeds to copy, I engaged, temporarily, an extra copying clerk, who interested me considerably, in consequence of his modest, quiet, gentlemanly demeanor, and his intense application to his duties.” In “Bartleby,” the lawyer likewise is in need of extra help and advertises for another copying clerk; he also is taken with the sedate, gentlemanly, and industrious qualities of his new employee. Both tales are narrated in the first person by a lawyer, and Bartleby shares his melancholy disposition with the scrivener in Maitland’s story. The similarities seem too particular to be the result of coincidence, although, unlike Bartleby, Maitland’s copying clerk is easily put out of the lawyer’s office once work dries up and the source of his melancholy is identified and resolved through the intervention of the lawyer. *The Lawyer’s Story* turns into a saga of family separation and lost inheritance very different from “Bartleby.” Even if Melville did read Maitland’s story, or at least the first chapter, the larger question is why did Melville think the relationship between a lawyer and a copying clerk would make a suitable subject for a piece of magazine fiction?

The answer is that the particular nature of Maitland’s story matters less than its generic qualities. Having a lawyer at the center of a mystery is what the stories share. And with lawyers come clerks. Dickens’s *Bleak House*, serialized in *Harper’s Monthly* from April 1852 to October 1853, contains numerous lawyers and clerks, and *David Copperfield* recounts David’s employment as a legal clerk with Mr. Spenlow. Indeed, Dickens’s first published story, “A Dinner at Poplar Walk” (1833), was the story of a bachelor clerk. Melville’s sister Helen shook Dickens’s hand on his 1842 trip to America, and both *Bleak House* and *David Copperfield* were family reading at Melville’s Arrowhead home in Pittsfield. Anybody acquainted with Dickens’s writing would know that lawyers and clerks were staple figures of Victorian fiction who served as the hinge by which characters were connected across class and status differences.
Lawyers and clerks of one description or another were also common enough in American magazine culture. The sensational “Dark Chapter From The Diary Of A Law Clerk” was published in *Harper’s Monthly* in October 1852 while the same magazine also published several lawyer’s tales, such as “The Gentleman Beggar: An Attorney’s Story” (October 1850), “Jane Eccles; Or, Confessions of An Attorney” (April 1851), and “Reminiscences of An Attorney” (August 1851). In the same issue as the first installment of “Bartleby,” clerks appear as characters in George William Curtis’s “The Potiphars in Paris” and Edmund Quincy’s serialization of *Wensley*, and they feature in a discussion of the characters of *Bleak House*. In an essay on Melville in the February 1853 issue of *Putnam’s Monthly*, Fitz-James O’Brien looks back fondly to *Typee* in whose island paradise Tommo and Toby “spend as agreeable a life as ever [a] town-imprisoned merchant’s clerk sighed for.”  

The second installment of “New-York Daguerreotyped” in the April 1853 issue, a piece about the commercial districts of Manhattan, drew attention to the architecture of the New York Custom House and how “utilitarian panes of plate glass … let in light upon the ‘attic cells,’ where custom-house clerks sit at their mahogany desks.” Clerks and the urban world in which they worked were common currency in magazine writing. This was partly because clerking was fast becoming the most common form of employment in 1850s New York City and partly because clerks – just as they did in Dickens – served as markers of status distinction for the readers of these magazines. Young clerks were also literate, committed to self-improvement, and eager consumers of the cultural capital one found in magazines. It is from “stalls nigh the Custom House” that Ginger Nut provides Turkey and Nippers with Spitzenbergs to moisten their mouths as they work at their own desks while performing the “husky” (*PT* 14) business of copying law papers. In vividly imagining the drudgery of clerks who could only daydream of exotic adventures and who were desk-bound in their ill-lit cells, *Putnam’s* had imagined the world of “Bartleby” even before Melville came to write the story.

To read “Bartleby” as magazine fiction, then, means reading it alongside other tales, essays, and reports that deal in the same component parts; to read it, that is, as embedded in the magazine world as a piece of genre writing. It is a story whose specific sources matter less than the broader literary and magazine tradition of lawyers and clerks on which it draws. It also serves the aspirations of the magazine by bringing the details of New York City life to the page at the same time as it expands the reader’s knowledge of a particular part of a more familiar world of work. And it gives clerks and their acquaintances a story highlighting the conditions giving rise to their daydreams rather than the contents of the daydreams themselves.
The importance of this clerking milieu is evident in the structure of the story. Bartleby does not appear in person until almost a third of the way through the first installment as it was published in *Putnam’s Monthly*. Before the reader meets the scrivener, the lawyer suggests “it is fit I make some mentions of myself, my employés, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings” (*PT* 13). Quite why it is “fit” is not clear given the relatively minor roles played by these ancillary characters in the rest of the story. But the lawyer-narrator is painstaking in his introductions to himself and especially to the idiosyncrasies of his other clerks – the aging Turkey, the younger Nippers, and the office boy Ginger Nut. This decision makes little sense in narrative terms. The lawyer’s claim that “some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented” (13) shows that it makes much more sense as a way of establishing the story’s generic credentials and the clerking environment with which the magazine’s readers would have been familiar.

These introductory descriptions also allow Melville to establish the tone of the story in a way that fulfills one other vital aspect of *Putnam’s* prospectus: “A man buys a Magazine,” the first editorial announced, “to be instructed, if you please, but the lesson must be made amusing.” In interpretations that privilege endings, Bartleby’s fate – imprisonment and death – negates the comedy of the lawyer’s narration. The portraits of his clerks, though, are comic sketches or caricatures and work primarily through exaggeration. So after his morning productivity begins to wane, Turkey grows “altogether too energetic” and has a “strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity about him” that causes him to “make an unpleasant racket in his chair,” to spill his sandbox, and to split his pencils and throw them to the floor in a fit of passion as he tries to mend them. Of Nippers, the lawyer observes bathetically that “I deemed him the victim of two evil powers – ambition and indigestion” (*PT* 16). It is the latter of these that preoccupies the lawyer as he explains Nippers’s protracted struggles to find the right height for his desk.

Turkey also shows himself to be a fluent pacifier of the lawyer in moments that work by wry comic reversal. When he complains about the blots Turkey makes on his copy, Turkey offers old age as his excuse: “Old age – even if it blot the page – is honorable. With submission, sir, we both are getting old” (16). And when the lawyer thinks about dismissing Turkey for “moistening a ginger-cake between his lips, and clapping it on to a mortgage for a seal,” Turkey makes an oriental bow and turns the situation to his advantage: “With submission, sir, it was generous of me to find you in stationery on my own account” (19). In his dealings with Bartleby, the lawyer also shows himself to be capable of comic intent. When Bartleby refuses various other
career options – a clerkship in a dry goods store, bartending, a traveling job collecting bills for merchants – the lawyer asks, “How then would going as a companion to Europe, to entertain some young gentleman with your conversation, – how would that suit you?” (41). The magazine reader is left to recognize the lawyer’s irony.

The sketch-like qualities and moments of comic exchange in “Bartleby,” while they fulfill Putnam’s remit to amuse, are features more often associated with the stories Melville wrote for Harper’s Monthly around the same time as “Bartleby” – “The Happy Failure,” “The Fiddler,” and “Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!” Shorter and much lighter in tone than “Bartleby,” what they seem to lack to a later reader is the seriousness one finds in Melville’s Putnam’s stories, especially “Bartleby” but also “Benito Cereno,” serialized in three parts from October to December 1855. At one level, Harper’s and Putnam’s were different kinds of magazines. Harper’s was popular, with a circulation of over one hundred thousand, and populist. In March 1857, a piece in Putnam’s described its rival as “a repository of pleasant, various reading, of sprightly chit-chat, and safe, vague, and dull disquisitions upon a few public questions.”

In contrast, the circulation of Putnam’s peaked at thirty-five thousand in the summer of 1853. The nature of the magazine’s content earned it a reputation for being both more original and more intellectually demanding than Harper’s, especially as political essays appeared with greater frequency toward the end of its existence in the autumn of 1857. Given these different qualities, Sheila Post-Lauria has argued that Melville adapted the style of his stories for each magazine, sending his stories with more complex political, social, and aesthetic themes to Putnam’s and his more sentimental and lightweight pieces to Harper’s. The two magazines were not, however, always so easily distinguished.

There were limits to what even Putnam’s would publish. “The Two Temples” was rejected because of the obvious attack on Grace Church in New York City. Another of Melville’s diptychs, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” appeared in Harper’s, but the stark examination of gender difference and female labor in a Massachusetts paper mill seems better suited to Putnam’s. More important, though, authors other than Melville wrote for and helped shape the tenor of both magazines. The most important of these figures was George William Curtis, one of the three founding editors of Putnam’s Monthly along with Charles Briggs and Parke Godwin. Curtis took on the role of gatekeeper for arts and literature at Putnam’s. At the same time he also wrote the popular “Editor’s Easy Chair” columns for Harper’s each month from April 1854 until his death in 1892. Curtis’s mild satires of metropolitan socialites were published as The Potiphar Papers (1853) and Prue and I (1856), after being serialized in
Putnam’s and Harper’s, respectively. There was little to distinguish them. Curtis’s own response to Melville’s stories was also mixed. He praised “Bartleby,” and once even had the scrivener appear briefly as a character in his own fiction. He liked “The Encantadas,” another story serialized in three parts, from March to May 1854, but had misgivings about “The Bell-Tower,” which he initially rejected before changing his mind. He showed only grudging admiration for “Benito Cereno,” telling his publisher: “take up Benito Cereno of Melville. You have paid for it. I should attenuate the dreadful statistic of the end…. why can’t Americans write good stories. They tell good lies enough, & plenty of ‘em.” The only story Curtis accepted for Putnam’s without question in this period was “I and My Chimney,” and the terms of his acceptance indicate the criteria on which he judged Melville’s stories: it was, he wrote, “a capital, genial, humorous sketch … thoroughly magazinish.” This story was not reprinted in The Piazza Tales. Curtis’s enthusiasm shows that while Putnam’s and Harper’s may have had different political and philosophical outlooks, their aesthetic standards were much less distinct. That Melville accidentally sent the manuscript of “Bartleby” to Harper’s instead of Putnam’s might indicate something similar.

Ordinary, generic, and magazinish: these are not adjectives often used to describe “Bartleby.” They are, though, the qualities that brought the story to publication. This is not to diminish the quality of “Bartleby” but to see Melville writing “the other way” and to read the story as it was encountered by readers of Putnam’s Monthly in 1853. To be sensitive to the way that a story comes into publication, however, does not mean discounting qualities that allow it to withstand the pressures of obsolescence. In fact, the capacity for a story like “Bartleby” to be transformed from ordinary magazine fiction into canonical text across 100 years may even be a consequence of the manner of its coming to publication. As well as writing within a tradition, Melville writes a story that goes beyond it. The story fulfills the remit Putnam’s Monthly set itself of offering “a running commentary on the countless phenomena of the times as they rise,” but the ambition of the story is to open up a new world: as the lawyer-narrator immediately suggests, “Bartleby” is about that “interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been written: – I mean the law-copyists or scriveners” (PT 13). Part of the story’s enduring quality results from the techniques Melville deploys to subject this new world to examination.

One of the dilemmas when thinking about Melville is why a writer now so revered was so routinely ignored or undervalued when he was writing and publishing. What do we see in his work that readers did not in the 1850s? The question, though, can be usefully turned the other way: What
did readers of his work in the 1850s see that we do not? Apart from the comparison to Poe in *The Literary World*, there is little evidence of any reaction to “Bartleby” as it appeared in *Putnam’s Monthly*. When reprinted in *The Piazza Tales* reviewers certainly saw the humor, but one word that reoccurs in the reviews is “quaint.” The New York *Criterion* described “Bartleby” as “a quaint tale, based upon living characters.” The Boston *Evening Traveller* wrote of the “quaint explanation” of Bartleby’s silence, while the New York *Tribune* noted a “quaintness of expression” across the collection as whole. These positive connotations of *quaint* stand in contrast to *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, whose disparaging review suggested Melville’s “style has an affectation of quaintness, which renders it, to us, very confused and wearisome.”

The modern meaning of *quaint* suggests something pleasantly old-fashioned. In all of these reviews, however, *quaint* is used in an archaic sense to indicate something elaborate, detailed, and artfully designed. This is the sense in which Melville uses the word in his own novels: “the quaint old arms on the panel” (*P* 19) of a carriage in *Pierre*, for instance, or the tattoos in *Typee* that Tommo compares to “quaint patterns we sometimes see in costly pieces of lace-work” (*T* 78). Perhaps more apparent when “Bartleby” was set alongside his other stories in *The Piazza Tales* rather than buried in the miscellany of a magazine, readers of the 1850s saw quite clearly the intricacies of Melville’s writing that distinguished it – for good or bad – from other writing.

To read “Bartleby” as magazine fiction, then, also means recognizing how Melville embeds these “quaint” designs in the story’s generic, or “magazinish,” dimensions. So the lawyer-narrator’s effort at the beginning of the story to describe Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut sketches and establishes their characters; it also elaborates the characters with detail – the multiplying of their eccentricities – without making them more than supporting characters or exceeding the purpose of a sketch. The lawyer’s delineation of his office space likewise locates the reader in the familiar territory of Wall Street and a white-collar working environment. It is then embellished with details – the white wall of the light shaft, the wall black with age at the other side of the chambers, the demarcation of space, and Bartleby’s place behind his screen – that go beyond the information needed to position the reader but do not threaten the reader’s familiarity with the scene. The brief references to John Jacob Astor and the Colt Adams murders might, in retrospect, add contextual weight to the story, but they work as topical asides for the reader of the 1850s without intruding on the central characters or the story’s development. All these details reward interpretation without impeding the story’s magazinish qualities.

Finally, and most wondrously of all of course, there is the design of Bartleby himself. Melville’s master stroke is to keep the reader constantly at
one remove from the scrivener, whose character becomes all the more mysterious and intriguing because one only ever encounters him from within the partial and retrospective imagining of the lawyer. In trying to understand Bartleby, the reader is continually confounded by first having to try and understand the lawyer. Both are revealed iteratively: through Bartleby’s refrain of “I prefer not to” and his repeated refusal to work; through the lawyer’s repeated descriptions of Bartleby as pallid; through the accumulation of incidents – Bartleby’s eating of ginger biscuits, his locking himself in the office, his unchanging demeanor – that the lawyer struggles to understand; and through Bartleby’s capacity to withstand the lawyer’s attempts to be rid of him. In these recurrences the reader follows the lawyer in looking for meaning, only to have that expectation deferred or denied. Unlike the copying clerk in Maitland’s *The Lawyer’s Story*, and even though his profession is central to his identity and gives him his place in this generic story of lawyers and clerks, Bartleby’s melancholy disposition and mysterious personality are never supplanted or explained by hard facts and family history.

In place of these, Melville brings together a series of details, actions, and observations and holds them in relation to one another in a way that provokes interpretation without telling the reader what to think. Coming at the end of the story, Bartleby’s tragic death appears to be the result of prior events. And yet the causal chain is not connected for the reader by the lawyer’s narration to show why Bartleby dies. The rumor of his previous employment in the Dead Letter Office tantalizes by suggesting an explanation. The lawyer himself is moved to say, “When I think of this rumor, hardly can I express the emotions which seize me” (*PT* 45). But just as the prospect of clarification seems at hand, the lawyer deepens the mystery still further in his conjectures about dead men, dead letters, and the effects they may have had on his former scrivener. What is reiterated is the partiality and incompleteness of the lawyer’s perspective. The rumor about the Dead Letter Office is the final addition to the story’s elaborately constructed design. Bartleby is truly *quaint* in the nineteenth-century meaning of the word, and Melville’s artful design of his character (and of his character’s demise) becomes part of the larger design of a story intended to function as magazine fiction.

“Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street” was written at a time when literary authorship and the cultural industry of magazines were undergoing an uneven and unpredictable development. Caught up in the midst of this process because of his need to write for money, Melville faced the problem of trying to ask the kinds of searching questions his novels explore within the confines of magazine fiction. By first taking a generic dramatic situation and then deploying his artful design, Melville makes the familiar
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and expected sufficiently less well known that it becomes intriguing but does not entirely confound. To read “Bartleby” as magazine fiction is to see how the magazine format disciplines and releases Melville’s creative energy. As if in ratification of his own idea that “the greatest, grandest things are unpredicted,” the longevity and ubiquity of “Bartleby” results from Melville managing the contingencies of his position as a reluctant magazine writer in the 1850s without abandoning his intellectual ambition. In “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” Melville writes that truth reveals itself in literature “only by cunning glimpses … covertly, and by snatches,” but that when it does the reader senses “those deep far-away things” that hint at the “the very axis of reality” (PT 244). Melville’s “Bartleby” continues to offer such glimpses to generation after generation.

NOTES

1 Literary World, December 3, 1853, 195.
2 Putnam’s Monthly Magazine, January 1853, 1.


*Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, April 1853, 353.


*Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, January 1853, 1.


George William Curtis to J. A. Dix; July 31, 1855; MS Am 800.13 (79) and George William Curtis to J. A. Dix; September 7, 1855; MS Am 800.13 (89), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

*Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, January 1853, 2.


From Melville’s marginalia on his copy of John Milton’s *Paradise Regained*, cited in Parker, *Herman Melville, 1851–1891*, 162.