

POLITICS

Occupy Wall Street's Debt to Melville

By Jonathan D. Greenberg

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How an 1853 short story gave today's movement against the 1 percent a tag-line and a heroic example of how to possess political space.



On May 1, students and activists are planning to revive the Occupy Wall Street movement with a general strike. One poster making the rounds on Facebook and other social media features a hamster nervously eyeing a treadmill, and above it the famous words, "I WOULD PREFER NOT TO." The hamster's wheel of course represents the drudgery of our modern routines; the phrase, many will recall, comes from Herman Melville's 1853 story "Bartleby, the Scrivener." Subtitled "A Tale of Wall Street," this cryptic narrative traces the sad fate of a passive-aggressive writer who refuses to

vacate the offices of a corporate lawyer. Bartleby was the first laid-off worker to occupy Wall Street.

It may seem odd to understand Occupy Wall Street through a story written 150 years before the tents went up in Zuccotti Park, when no one had heard of a human microphone and when Trinity Church was the tallest building in New York. But Bartleby literally does occupy Wall Street -- specifically the offices of Melville's narrator, a lawyer for the 19th century one-percenters who does "a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds." And the way that Melville represents Bartleby's occupation can help us understand the power of the endlessly intriguing movement that is promising to return with renewed fervor this spring. What's more, this staple of the English Literature curriculum can speak to the ways that Wall Street itself is coming to occupy the classroom itself.

The word "occupy" itself recurs with startling frequency throughout Melville's story to describe Bartleby's inactive action of staying put without working. At first the narrator is pleased with the steadiness of Bartleby's occupation of his office, since the

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scrivener works productively, but when the narrator stops by on a Sunday, he is unsettled to find that his own clerk (who is making his home there) refuses to admit him to the office: "Not yet," says Bartleby, "I am occupied." When Bartleby stops working, the lawyer wonders, like a weak-hearted Bloomberg, whether he should evict the stubborn copyist. He is gripped by a queasy

vision in which the occupier of Wall Street becomes its possessor: "The idea came upon me of his possibly turning out a long-lived man, and keep occupying my chambers, and denying my authority." Bartleby, he fears, will eventually "claim possession of [his] office by right of his perpetual occupancy." Even after the scrivener is evicted from the office, Bartleby continues to cause "great tribulation" by "persisting in occupying the entry."

When, the narrator wonders, does occupation become possession? Who has a right to occupy what space? Who must work for whom? What happens in our society to those who can't -- or simply won't -- work? What obligations do we have to those who prefer not to fit into the system, or run on the hamster's wheel? The narrator would like simple answers to such questions. He tries to view his conflict with Bartleby as a matter of property rights, and when he urges Bartleby to vacate, he sounds a lot like a wealthy suburban homeowner: "What earthly right have you to stay here? Do you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?"

Yet against this language of property rights, the story introduces a subtle counter-discourse of hazy motives, wishes and feelings. Bartleby's "queer word" of choice, *to prefer*, injects into the story a defiant note of desire, shifting our analysis of his occupancy from economic rights to preferences and wishes. (Bartleby appears never to touch the money that he is paid, removing himself from the money economy altogether.) As a wealthy but good-intentioned liberal, the narrator struggles to understand Bartleby's motives -- to determine, ultimately, the extent to which his ethical obligations to Bartleby exceed his legal ones.

Like many of Melville's stories, "Bartleby" at once demands and frustrates interpretation. The unclarity of Bartleby's aims -- What does he actually want? What are his demands? -- invites our attention but defeats our reading. By refusing to articulate specific demands, Bartleby defies the very terms on which Wall Street does business. Melville thus provides a prescient illustration of the force of the Occupy movement. For although those of us who support Occupy tend to agree about matters such as anti-poverty programs, tax fairness, workers' rights, and the regulation of financial markets, OWS seemed last fall to gain political power precisely as it held back from articulating any specific list of policy demands -- holding back, in Bartleby-like fashion, from any self-definition that might diminish the unsettling force of the movement and allow it to be co-opted by politics as usual. The blank Bartlebyan inscrutability of Occupy Wall Street came to constitute its greatest power.



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Wouldn't a famous political radical make a better poster boy -- as the Tea Partiers of the American Revolution have done for their contemporary right-wing namesakes? Bartleby is among the first modern bureaucrats to serve as a literary hero. Working before the invention of the mimeograph, he copies legal

documents with perfect accuracy. This is soul-killing work. "To some sanguine temperaments," muses Melville's narrator, "it would be altogether intolerable.... I cannot credit that the mettlesome poet Byron would have

contentedly sat down with Bartleby to examine a law document of, say five hundred pages, closely written in a crimped hand." The invocation of Byron is crucial; Bartleby's writing is as far from poetry as you can get. It is bureaucratic scribbling, in which there is no room for originality, authorship, style, ornament, or pleasure. Is it any wonder that Bartleby "decide[s] upon doing no more writing"?

The OWS poster that quotes Bartleby describes May 1st as a day of no work. It also, appropriately, calls it a day of no school. For Wall Street these days is increasingly encroaching upon the classroom. Hedge fund managers and for-profit operations are taking over public education. The logic of management consultants guides the so-called education reform movement, which shuts down and reopens schools like unprofitable retail outlets at a strip mall. As an English professor, I am increasingly kept busy by bureaucracy; my colleagues and I lament our inability to do our "real writing" because we are always scribbling -- reading, writing, revising, signing, forwarding, developing, and implementing the proposals, initiatives, forms, memos, and documents that the system mandates. Under the indistinguishable education policies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, today's teachers must, like Bartleby, reproduce without variation the curricula and lessons dictated from on high.

Yet perhaps because Wall Street's influence on education has become so great, we are starting to hear calls to occupy the classroom. More and more I see the phrase scrawled in colored chalk on the walkways of the university that employs me, Montclair State. The Occupy movement has targeted some

public meetings of the New York City Department of Education. Against the putative reformers who see teachers and students as mere copyists, Herman Melville's enigmatic fable -- written when our modern capitalist bureaucracy was just emerging -- might help us think of today's students not as future scribes but as future intellectuals who can question the conditions under which we all learn and live. Bartleby, the first worker to occupy Wall Street, can now help us to occupy the classroom. Imagine what would happen if, confronted by the mandates of Race to the Top, students, teachers, principals, and even governors would state, simply and plainly, "I would prefer not to"?
