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## Through the Eyes of a Scrivener

**I**N FALL 2001 *All Things Considered* aired a short segment from *Monty Python's Flying Circus* that reconstructs Thomas Hardy's first attempts to write *Return of the Native*, in the style of professional sportscasting. A crowd cheers and sighs behind the commentators' play-by-play. An excerpt:

**MAN #2:** And the crowd goes quiet now as Hardy settles himself down at the desk, body straight, shoulders relaxed, pen held lightly but firmly in the right hand. He dips the pen in the ink and he's off! It's the first word, but it's not a word. Oh, no! It's a doodle. Where? But up in the top, left-hand margin. It's a piece of meaningless scribble. And he's signed his name underneath it. Oh, dear, what a disappointing start. But he's up again and here he goes, the first word of Thomas Hardy's new novel at 10:35 on this very lovely morning. It's three letters. It's a definite article. And it's "the," Dennis. . . . but he's crossed it out. Thomas Hardy here on the first day of his new novel has crossed out the only word he's written so far, and he's gazing off into space. Oh, oh, dear, he signed his name again.

**DENNIS:** It looks like *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* all over again.

**MAN #2:** But he's—no, he's down again and writing, Dennis. He's writing "the" again. He's crossed it out again, and he's written "A." And there's a second word coming up straight away and it's "sat." "A sat." It doesn't make sense. "A Satur," "A Saturday." It's "A Saturday," and the crowd is loving it. They're really enjoying this novel. . . .

And so begins every story—with such pomp!—depending on circumstance. But to focus the fanfare: Sequencing letters into words into sentences, linearly progressing, a writer arranges language according to (or countering) syntactical cues. From capitals and punctuation, to subject and verb agreements, parenthetical asides are added to enclose a digression or interlude, as in e.e. cummings:

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Because this essay could go in any number of directions but needs to continue linearly, sentences slowly aggregate into paragraphs and fill a page—as is happening here, to develop the third full paragraph. Of the material so far, the majority is directly quoted. Copied verbatim, the words of Thomas Hardy and e.e. cummings and John Cleese et al. occupy physical space here, but more: they've begun to occupy mental space in both the writer and the reader. As it happens, Hardy and cummings have nothing to do with our "destination," except insofar as they demonstrate the physical sequencing of words, which then influences comprehension. This invites us to consider the text cartographically. *Characters* as letters offer a parallel to *characters* as fictional personae, as each inhabits physical and mental spaces. When a linear typography attempts to carry a less linear, metaphysical content—as occurs in Herman Melville's novella "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall Street"—a new topography unfolds.

To establish spatial relations first parochially, "Bartleby" occurs primarily in the financial district of mid-nineteenth-century New York, in a lawyer's rented chambers. The employer, who is the narrator, establishes the office as integral to his relationship with the title character, a hermit-like scrivener who works behind a folding screen and who consistently defines himself by negative rhetoric: *nothing, no, none, not*. The narrator defines his narrative in similar terms: "While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby *nothing* of that sort can be done. I believe that *no* materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. . . . Bartleby was one of those beings of whom *nothing* is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case those are very small" (italics mine). Thirty years removed, the narrator is relying on his memory of Bartleby, of the scrivener's interactions with the staff of copyists, and of the office itself, which becomes like a character, given the role it plays (and space it occupies) in the story.

The office is depicted as Bartleby inhabits it. After a preliminary description by the narrator—including a view from a skylight shaft that "might have been

considered . . . deficient in what landscape painters call 'life' . . . [while] the other end of my chambers offered, at least, a contrast, if nothing more"—Bartleby arrives and is placed. The other copyists work behind a glass wall, but the narrator assigns Bartleby a desk on his side of the divider behind a "folio"-like folding screen, so "privacy and society were conjoined." The hermit copyist initially works industriously. He stays behind his screen and desk. Increasingly, he "prefers not to" leave the office after hours and secretly makes the chambers his domestic refuge, which the narrator calls Bartleby's "hermitage," with its view of a "dead brick wall." On an unexpected visit to the space one Sunday, the narrator finds himself locked out, "a key . . . turned from within," before Bartleby asks him to leave. The scrivener does not vacate the premises after he stops working and remains "standing immovable in the middle of the room" in a "dead-wall reverie." Although the narrator is the employer, he feels pressured, albeit passively, to leave permanently. The characters' movements continue outward from the original center: from the office and the financial district, to the Yards of the Tombs and greater New York, to the "sequel" about the Dead Letter Office, when the narrator concludes, "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!"

Such a charting of the characters' steps invites a cartographic exploration of the text. The narrator centers his world (Wall Street, Courts of Justice, the Tombs, Trinity Church) in addition to providing radial points (Jersey City, Hoboken, Manhattanville [as it was then known], Astoria) to suggest the circumference of his familiar sphere. His life orbits his work. Domestic space is virtually neglected (unless as parody) apart from when the narrator wonders about Bartleby's native place and offers his own home as an alternative hermitage for the scrivener. Although this topic could open up a compelling gender critique—consider the "home-thrusts," the cleaning woman in the attic who has a spare key to the office, the narrator's lifelong bachelorhood as well as his professed impotence in the face of his copyist's "self-possessed" nonchalance—my exploration underway here revolves around geographic considerations, in and beyond Wall Street. Using the coordinate points in the context of a wider projection—that of the world—the story becomes a meeting ground for different cosmologies.

A word about world maps. Despite the spherical nature of our planet, the history of cartography includes an array of two-dimensional projections. Among other examples, maps made from Ptolemy's notes lack a few continents; Isidore of Seville's representations appear as a T-shaped landmass in an oceanic O; and Mercator's accurate longitudinal rendering grandly distorts other features (Greenland,

for one thing, is noticeably inflated). What appears in a map's center is another significant variable: I once saw Earth depicted in a Scandinavian airline magazine with the Arctic circle in the middle, which shifted more than my sense of location. As local, national, and international perceptions meld with science, maps both orient and disorient. Often, they address a reader: "You are here." But at least collectively, they offer contrasting views of *here* in relation to *there*.

If text can mimic a map:

Being *here*, I plan to go *there*—since this essay attempts to follow a linear form (nodding to the ancient Roman *itinerarium*, or written itinerary)—by detouring from the physical and mental spaces that we're coming to inhabit. Literally and literarily. A non-New Yorker (and native northern Californian) who lived in New York City for only a few years, I still experience childlike awe while wending through the Village around former haunts of Edith Wharton, Edna St. Vincent-Millay, and Henry James; when gazing up stone steeples under sweeping skyscrapers and sky. The history of the city—as an international crossroads, as a seedbed for national independence, as a glacially formed topography—I find alluring. I am interested equally in learning the Dutch origins of names like the Bowery, Harlem, and Brooklyn; in seeing pieces of eighteenth-century willow china plates exhibited in New York City Unearthed near Battery Park as well as medical stations at Ellis Island; in exploring old-growth forests in the Bronx Botanical Garden and perusing J. P. Morgan's private-made-public collections of medieval music manuscripts, not to mention everything but the Seven Wonders of the World; in walking down West 125th Street, past the Apollo Theater and Hotel Theresa, sensing the spirits of Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes. My view of New York is still that of an outsider, but my mental map grows to accommodate places as I experience them personally: Chumley's, the former speakeasy unmarked at 84 Bedford Street, where the walls are plastered with original dust jackets of books by authors who frequented the joint during its heyday, and where my then husband-to-be and I had our first dinner together; the Metropolitan Museum, brimming with global art and artifacts, some of which worked their way into my first published short story; a swarming market in Brighton Beach under the Q subway train, where all attendants seemed to speak only Russian, so gesticulations garnered a lunch of mystery deli items and a box of matzos to eat on the boardwalk near Nathan's and the Cyclone, surrounded by strutting sunbathers, hip-hoppers around boom boxes, and bilingual Spanish and English soapbox preachers. . . . Priorly in reading, I didn't have the orientation

needed to plot proximities in and around Manhattan, Washington Square or Heights (on opposite ends of the island), or across the Hudson and East Rivers, to Jersey City and Astoria. My mind distilled these discrete locations into “New York” to interrelate literary settings, news broadcasts, Jacob Riis and Margaret Bourke-White photographs, Ashcan and abstract paintings, and films by Adolph Zukor, Spike Lee, Woody Allen—with little interference by reality, and without much culpability. When I moved there and experienced the benefits of inhabiting and being inhabited by the place, that changed.

Herewith my account of mental and physical meetings with regards to “Bartleby” after a particular date in history: After September 11, 2001, I cannot read about Broadway and Wall Street without a double consciousness. Trinity Church isn’t merely a place where the narrator passes on Sunday, but is the structure that stood when everything around it fell. Since “Bartleby”—both as story and as character—is defined by negative rhetoric, I have seen its real-life setting in similar terms: by what is *not* there, by what is *absent* more than *present*. Thousands of lives and the structures that housed them are gone. Such a rhetoric of undoing reminds me, too, of an e-mail that a friend-of-a-friend sent immediately following the Trade Center’s collapse: the single sentence, “There are no words.” *Nothing, none, not, no*. In the days and months (and even now, four years) after that event, the cavernous shock seems to defy articulation. In fall 2001, if only to make a sound against silence with footsteps or stifled weeping, mourners wandered through Central Park, Columbus Circle, and Riverside Park without a destination. Strangers met one another’s glances, even embraced while passing on the streets, helping to clear rubble or providing services to those who were displaced. Collectively, everyone made Manhattan a grave marker with flower altars at fire stations, candle vigils in parks, and flyers of remembrance (of missing loved ones, sought by their hair color, height, weight, attire, tattoos, scars, even hip replacements) on shop windows, bus kiosks, and lamp posts. They constituted a memorial for what was absent in our presence.

You are here.  
 There are no words.  
*Nothing, none, not, no.*  
 (“Ah, humanity!”)

As I reflect on global events that preceded that terrorist strike and haunt the aftermath, the definitions of *absent* and *present*—and the infinite interstice between

the extremes—make me more aware of the white space wherein any person navigates, engaged with or detached from life; and how (if) this is articulated. The consideration involves a larger question of human purpose in accord with varying world views, whether they are classified as religious, mythological, or cosmological. In “Bartleby” the backdrop includes the Courts of Justice and the Tombs, suggesting a range of codifications that have governed, promoting peace or conflict among societies, across time and place. How have these been determined? What has been defended, and why? What cardinal points remake themselves in order to fit changing circumstances, for what sake and at what stake?

To return to cartography: The contrast between the narrator’s and Bartleby’s cosmologies stretches the argument beyond the physical world. In *The Wake of the Gods*, H. Bruce Franklin convincingly critiques the story as an intersection of three ethics: of Wall Street (“action in and of the world”), of Christ (“action in the world for other-worldly reasons”), and of Eastern monasticism (“non-action, that is, withdrawal from the world”). He details the narrator’s actions and words in terms of the first two ethics. The narrator follows religion in terms of costs and benefits: “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.” After considering Bartleby as a Christ-figure, Franklin favors associating the scrivener with the Saniassi in Hinduism. He argues that a direct source for Melville’s novella was Thomas Maurice’s *Indian Antiquities*, which details the Saniassis’ systematic eating and drinking withdrawals, pointing to “the calm, the silent, dignity with which he suffers the series of complicated evils through which he is ordained to toil”; for Bartleby “can only be fed by the charity of others . . . , must himself make no exertion, nor feel any solicitude for existence upon this contaminated orb.” Franklin identifies more particular parallels, including a diet reduced to one kind of food (in Bartleby’s case, gingernuts) and, in the last days of life, the refusal of all food and drink. The narrator likens the “cadaverous” Bartleby to a “ghost,” “an apparition.” As Franklin suggests, the narrator’s recollection of the copyist invites readers to see the story as a microcosmic reflection on mythology and myth making, on what causes mythologies to change as they come in contact with one another in coexistence or confrontation, with live and dead letters.

As we today grope among myriad *scriptures* (according to *Webster’s*, “the sacred writings of a religion; a body of writings considered as authoritative; something written”) for a rhetoric that enables us to encompass what we read about

current manmade and natural disasters, I would suggest that a tension resonant with our time seems present in Melville's novella. Granted, Bartleby's passivity seems to be the antithesis of the violent acts of 9/11 and of subsequent events in Iraq, Israel and Palestine, and the Sudan, to name only a few places wrought by current social strife. But on an interpersonal level, the narrator seems to misinterpret the scrivener's actions and mind-set—in the same way that I, too, may be misinterpreting now, a risk endemic to reading any map, which guides through inclusions and exclusions. In any case, the pair—the narrator and Bartleby—has trouble coexisting. Despite the narrator's education and vocation, he lacks the terminology to articulate Bartleby's actions of detachment and constantly falls back on assumptions: “. . . and upon that assumption built all I had to say”; the story is “all I know of him,” he maintains. Still, it is doubtful whether the narrator will consider a range of reasons for behaviors without exposure to someone like Bartleby. He falters and admits: “It is not seldom the case that when a man is browbeaten in some unprecedented and violently unreasonable way, he begins to stagger in his own plainest faith. He begins, as it were, vaguely to surmise . . . all the justice and all the reason is on the other side.” The narrator begins to question distinctions between poverty and wealth, order and disorder, morality and immorality, mortality and immortality, sanity and insanity, society and solitude, sterility and fertility, silence and sound—but explains them ultimately only in terms of his own world view. Christianity and Wall Street remain what he knows and makes of them. Without accepting wider bases for behaviors, he faults Bartleby (even condescending to him as a victim) rather than implicating himself.

Since the narrator is unable to understand the scrivener, he feels Bartleby's effect, not just in the alteration of his space, but in that of his mind as well. Involuntarily beginning to use the infamous word *prefer*, the narrator worries: “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?” He explains that the scrivener's “body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach.” Bartleby is charged with vagrancy for staying in one place but is the one who knows where he is, while the narrator seeks other quarters, unable to coordinate his physical and mental spaces. Like other roles that are reversed, the narrator figuratively becomes the copyist, the imitator who follows the directions of turnkeys in the Tombs Prison and looks to the past, not to the future. The story is his dead letter, like those received in the Dead Letter Office. And although the narrator frames the story as a biography of the scrivener, it is

more autobiographical. “Bartleby, the Scrivener” seems to be the signature of the narrator as he searches for his self.

In *The Self-Made Map* (1996) Tom Conley argues: “The self’s emergence is evinced where discourse and geography are coordinated, and the self becomes autonomous only (1) when it is fixed to an illusion of a geographic truth (often of its own making) and (2) when it can be detached from the coordinates that mark its point of view, its history, its formation, and the aesthetics and politics of its signature.” Even if “Bartleby” is the narrator’s signature, his “I” does not achieve autonomy. He never seems to detach from the coordinates of his place and time; as he narrates the events thirty years after they occur, nothing seems changed for him personally, culturally, or historically. This stasis may stem from a crisis of faith, as Dan McCall surmises in *The Silence of Bartleby*, quoting William James at the start: “All religions must begin with an answer to the single cry for help. Bartleby is the cry *Help* incarnate, or so the Lawyer hears it. . . . Grief awakens the man to his own life.” Regardless, the narrator seems caught between world views, as stationary as his scrivener—“a sort of innocent and transformed Marius brooding among the ruins of Carthage”—but the contours of their rooms differ. The narrator remains trapped in his own place and time, in himself. If we read the novella by this map (complicated, to be sure, by the wealth of criticism generated since its first publication 150 years ago), the scrivener seems to travel in mind—at least in its withdrawal—beyond the Hudson and East Rivers, and past his self.

The encroachment of one cosmology upon another brings us back to the point where physical and mental spaces overlap in this day and age, in the mind of this struggling scrivener: “You are here.”

. . . Oh, she scratches the mark! The crowd sighs. Another letter, it’s . . . G! The crowd holds for more, it’s . . . r-e-t-c-h-e—But she crosses out again. What a disappointment. So close, but here, she’s trying again: lifting the pen from the paper, and . . .

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Considering what lies between the lines, the beginning and end:

Looking westward across the East River from the Brooklyn Promenade in August 2001, I decided not to photograph the steel skyline, preferring not to, preferring to frame subjects that seemed more ephemeral. And then the unthinkable happened—the skyline changed. Everyone knows the story: On the morning of September 11, 2001, four airplanes were hijacked by terrorists, and two crashed into the World Trade Center towers. The story remains a backdrop for us, even after inhabitants of the city have returned to or created a new sense of normalcy, even as we have tried to articulate and rearticulate the event and its aftermath through articles, stories, plays, films, and books, to consider absences in our presence—not only in New York City, but around the world—and our roles and relations in the context of these events. One effect these articulations have pointed to is a disorientation: of privileged world views, world views of the privileged. And in the undoing, new orientations become possible, by enlarging what is encompassed by our physical and mental spaces. As the old Arabian adage has it: *If you fall down a well in broad daylight, look up, and you'll see the stars.*

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