The Approach to the City in Whitman's Poetry and in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

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One of the major signs of the national development that marked America during the mid-19th century was the remarkable development of the cities in the Eastern Seaboard, especially that of New York City. It was, first of all, the construction of the Erie Canal in 1820 that launched New York into the nation's chief port of entry. Then there was the phenomenal rise of commerce and industry which helped this originally commercially-minded town to become the unrivaled center of wealth—the center of commerce and banking.[1]

The growth of New York as the nation's top metropolis had a special significance in the cultural history of America. The rigid puritanical code of the founding fathers was gone for good, and the elegant leisurely way of life of the landed aristocracy was also a thing in the past except in the limited area of the South where slavery was kept. Instead, there appeared a new kind of moral code and way of life suitable to the needs of the newly risen middle class who were more practical and materialistic but freer and more energetic. After all, the older towns of Boston and Philadelphia represented more or less the culture of the Old World—bound by class-consciousness and old mannerisms, whereas New York represented things that were unique to the new growing
nation. As Mary Booth boastfully pointed out, it had all the newest fruits of American technology—"Ocean Telegraph, the Steamboat, the Erie Canal," and its dazzling wealth together with its "open-handed liberality" attracted to its heart people of all classes and occupations, such as, "men of science, enterprise, and broad and earnest thought, engineers, mechanics, far-seeing merchants, talented artists and brilliant literary men."(2) However, the picture of New York was not altogether a brilliant one. It was already overshadowed by the evil symptoms of the city life which are familiar to us now—bad air, miserable working conditions, and above all, the loneliness and solitude that separates the city people from each other.

Of those who witnessed the remarkable rise of New York were the two literary giants of the mid-19th century America, Walt Whitman and Herman Melville. As is well-known, both writers appeared in the literary scene as the culmination of the so-called New England Renaissance after Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne. Less well-known is the fact that they represented simultaneously the generation of the new industrial age, both being the native New Yorkers of the mid-19th century, born within a few months and a few miles from each other. Each tried to picture in his writings, his own familiar aspect of New York, Whitman giving a powerful expression to its bright side, and Melville fixing his eyes on its somber, darker side. In spite of their opposing views, their ways of treating the city were equally original, even quite stimulating to us, modern readers.

The purpose of this paper is, then, to enunciate the two writers' contrasting approaches to the city in their works, assessing at the same time how the environment of the rising metropolis of that particular period helped to lend its color and complexity to those two great American authors. This will be achieved chiefly through the analyses of Whitman's several poems on New York and
Melville’s short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener, a Story of the Wall Street.”

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Although Walt Whitman (1819–1892), in one of his poems, refers to himself as “of Manhattan, the son,” the part of New York he was born in was not Manhattan, but West Hills, Long Island, then a still rural farming village. Both of his parents were descendents of a long-line Long Island farmers. When Whitman was four, the whole family moved to Brooklyn which was closer to the bustling center of New York. Since then Whitman preferred to spend much of his time in the heart of the metropolis, taking various kinds of jobs which his limited formal education allowed him to. Bookish by nature and with a vague notion of becoming a writer, Whitman succeeded in getting a position as editor and contributor on various newspapers in New York from 1843 to 1844. In 1846 again, he became editor of Brooklyn Journal, an influential liberal newspaper of Brooklyn. Those experiences as a New York journalist supplied him with ample opportunities of observing closely the daily events and changing landscape of the city area. Except for those years as a journalist mentioned above, Whitman made his living during his youth mostly by working as a common labourer, such as, printer, carpenter, sailor and mechanic. Hence the New York he knew and loved most was not that of John Jacob Astor or other new industrial tycoons but that of common working men—the busiest, liveliest downtown section of the city where the growth of the metropolis was daily visible.

Among Whitman’s poems on the city, “Mannahatta,” published in the third edition of Leaves of Grass is the most straightforward celebration of New York. The title “Mannahatta” is the aboriginal name for New York, and Whitman starts his poem with the expression of his satisfaction in finding a word which is “something
specific and perfect for my city.” Then characteristically he proceeds with his poem citing the catalogue of the various places and objects that constitute the heart of New York City:

Numberless crowded streets, high growths of iron, slender, strong, light, splendidly uprising toward clear skies,
Tides swift and ample, well-loved by me, toward sundown,

The countless masts, the white shore-steamers, the lighters, ferry-boats ...
The downtown streets, the jobbers' houses of business, the houses of business of the shipmerchants and money-brokers ...

Then the poet turns his eyes to various kinds of people that fill the city, all in dynamic movements. They are: “immigrants arriving”, “the manly race of drivers of horses,” “the brown faced,” “the mechanics of the city, the masters, wellformed, beautiul faced, looking you staight in the eyes.” The poem is concluded with the following lines which show Whitman's profound pride in his beloved city:

A million people—manners free and superb—open voices—hospitality—the most courageous and friendly youngmen,
City of hurried and sparkling waters! city of spires and masts!
City nested in bays! my city! (3)

In this poem we find no deep philosophizing, nor reasoning which makes Whitman’s poems profound but difficult. Here is sheer sense of exhilaration at the gorgeous panorama full of life and movement which his method of catalogue conveys effectively.

It should be noted that no one before Whitman could find so much poetic beauty in the life and landscape of the city, Indeed, the
mere idea of making poetry out of the city must have been a surprise to most of his predecessors. The chief source of inspiration to the older poets like William Cullen Bryant and John Whittier, for example, was that of the serene objects of nature in the tradition of British nature poets, or else things that had existed in the faraway past. Whitman was revolutionary enough to break away from those poetic conventions. He had quick responsive eyes to any common object which daily surrounded him and could sense its unique charm and beauty immediately.

Then there always existed in the Americans' consciousness the tension between civilization and wilderness, or conflict between town and forest, which associated town with corruption and forest with innocence and freedom. Thus Fenimore Cooper's hero Natty Bumpoo had to go farther into the wilderness in order to flee from "the accursed sounds" of "the chopper's axes," while Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester and Dimmesdale could regain their true selves only in the forest. Even those Transcendentalists, Emerson and Thoreau, who were the best sympathizers of Whitman were quite alien from the kind of beauty that Whitman saw abundantly in the city. Just like Natty Bumpoo, Thoreau had to take to the woods on the Walden Pond in order to face "the vital facts of life," being the sort of man who "felt more at home in the company of minks and muskrats than in the cities of men."[4] Likewise Ralph Waldo Emerson could not abandon the serene company of a rhodora nor could he step down from the altar of the Concord minister, although this inability kept vexing him considerably. Whitman was different from all those people. Truly democratic in both theory and practice, he was delighted in common objects and common men, and it was in order to celebrate those "people-en-masse" that he wrote the entire Leaves of Grass.

To him, tension between civilization and wilderness, if it ever existed in his consciousness, was something easily solved ending in
the sure victory of civilization over wilderness. To him, Western movement of frontier was equivalent to men's joyous progress toward the new society where all the promises of the New World were to be fulfilled. Thus in "Song of the Red Wood Tree", "the red wood tree, the last remnant of the untamed nature", gives way joyously to the superior race of men to build and reign the "new empire." Mingled with the death-chant of the red wood tree are "the musical sounds" of "choppers' axes" which to Natty Bumpoo's ears sounded "accursed," and "wicked." And the "new empire" that the poet sees in his vision is to be fulfilled with "populous cities, the latest invention, farm with machinery."[5] Thus to Whitman, the city is not somewhere to escape from but a place which should actually replace wilderness.

In his celebration of modern technology again, Whitman was different from Thoreau and other nature lovers. As he says in the poem "To the Locomotive in Winter," what he saw in the modern technology was "type of modern—emblem of motion and power—pulse of continent,"[6] and precisely the same kind of power and beauty he found in New York. It should also be pointed out that in Whitman's sense, his New York, the downtown Manhattan did not fit in the conventional picture of the East or town which is associated with evil and corruption. It was the town of common people—of mechanics, sailors, and drivers, whose "liberality" and "open-mindedness" resembled more to the atmosphere of pioneers and frontiersmen rather than the rigid, class-oriented Bostonians.

Whitman's glorification of the city did not mean, however, that he was unable to appreciate the wholesome atmosphere of the rural country. His poem "Give me the Splendid Silent Sun" well indicates this fact. Here the poet is forced to make a choice between the two opposing worlds—the peace and rustic charm of nature and the "powerful throb" of the city. The former half of the poem is dedicated to expressing the poet's strong attraction to the rural
charm of the countryside:

Give me splendid silent sun with all his beams full dazzling,
Give me autumnal fruit ripe and red from the orchard,

Give me fresh corn and wheat, give me serene-moving animals teaching content,
Give me odourous at sunrise a garden of beautiful flowers, where I can walk undisturbed,

Give me a perfect child, give me away aside from the noise of the world, a rural domestic life,
Give me solitude, give me Nature, give me again
O! Nature your primal sanities!

Thus when his yearning for nature seems most heightened, he suddenly shifts his attention to the city and comes to a realization that after all he is "enchained" to "the streets" of Manhattan. He simply cannot accept a life as a bystander or observer, but chooses to commit himself to "an intense life, full to repletion and varied," life among "people, endless, streaming, with strong voices, passions, paegents." The poem is concluded with the manifestation of even a stronger conviction in the betterness of Manhattan streets than the rural countryside.

Whitman's desire to be among people, his strong need for the sense of communion with his fellow men, is best indicated in his most famous poem on New York, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." In the poem the poet stands fascinated among the endless procession of men and women crossing on the ferries:

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me!
On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me!

The poet's meditation leads him to a sense of oneness not only with the people he sees at present but with the generations to come in future by the mystical mutual sharing of common experiences and sensations:

It avails not, time or place—distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or even so many generations hence
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,

Or again:

Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not
I too lived in Brooklyn of ample hills was mine,
I too walked the streets of Manhattan Island, and bathed in the waters around it,18

The incessant flow of crowds in the ferries is finally identified with men's eternal progress toward immortality, the concept of which is the foundation of Whitman's idea of cosmic man. Thus Whitman's approach to the city, his celebration of it in his poems, is, in its final analysis, inseparably wedded to his firm belief in the brightness of men's destiny.

Since Whitman's time, various American writers and poets tried to capture once again the same poetic beauty in the city of New York—Hart Crane and Thomas Wolfe among them, but no one could
ever express such a genuine, whole-hearted delight and belief in the magnificence of the city as Whitman did.

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Whether one knows Herman Melville (1819–1891) as the author of the delightful South Sea romances which became a great popular success during his lifetime, or as the author of the more ambitious later works including *Moby Dick* which came to be acclaimed as a masterpiece only after his death, in either case, one finds it rather difficult to picture this author as a genuine New Yorker both by birth and upbringing—perhaps even more so than Walt Whitman. Of the entire body of Melville's voluminous works, five out of eight full-length novels and two of the most important short stories are almost exclusively concerned with the lives of seaman. Hence Melville was commonly regarded in his lifetime as an author uniquely qualified to depict “the poetry of the ship—her voyages and her crew,” and D. H. Lawrence in our own century also called him “poet of the sea” or “a Viking going home” or even “a water animal” unable to face humanity. But in his real life, Melville was far more of a landsman than “a water animal.” The actual length of the period during which Melville went voyaging totaled approximately five years out of his entire lifespan, and the remaining period of his sixty-eight years was spent mostly in New York or its close vicinity. The Pacific was to Melville a spiritual home just like Hannibal was to Mark Twain, whereas New York remained only a physical home—or even a prison-house he could not escape from throughout his life.

Why Melville came to have such a bleak vision of the city can largely be explained from his personal history. Born as the second son of a prosperous businessman in New York, Herman was at first in a position to enjoy a variety of social privileges that the city could offer—such as, formal education given at a prestigious private
high school, attendance to dance schools and exchange of parties with the children of the similar status, and so forth. But when Herman was eleven, his father Allan's business went to bankruptcy and the whole family were obliged to move out to Albany, site of the state capitol. There things went even worse. Two years after their move, Allan committed suicide on account of a severe nervous breakdown, and the eldest son Gansvourt also fell ill and took to bed after a brief career as a manufacturer of hats. As for young Herman, although he was beginning to show his bookishness and talent in writing, he could neither hope for the gentlemanly status of Hawthorne and Emerson, nor could he take active pleasure in feeling oneness with common working people like Whitman. The only career conceivable to Melville in those days was to be, in modern terms, a white-collar worker, such as, an office clerk, minor officer or a salesman—an existence more respectable perhaps but more wretched in many respects than that of a manual labourer. (After all, during his youth, Melville did not choose any of these positions as his permanent career, but it should be noted that in his later life after he was forced to abandon his public career as a writer on account of the extremely poor receptions his later ambitious novels had, he became an office clerk in the custom house of New York and worked there eventually for as many as twenty years.) Thus the world centering around New York which once seemed to be such a pleasant place became an unbearably dull place from the viewpoint of a prospective white-collar worker. It was not only a dull place but an abomimable place to him for it was governed by the ethics of "business" and "money", the two accursed words which brought such misery and hardship to Melville household.

It was in order to get away from all this that Melville took a momentous step to "take to the ship" in 1931. To be sure, it was a very successful venture, for the subsequent five-year period he
spent on and off upon various ships floating over the Pacific or the brief contact he had with the natives living on the primitive islands of the South Seas awakened in Melville a significant recognition—a recognition that man is only a puny object in the scheme of the universe and that the progress of civilization has no meaning against the vast background of nature. As a result of those voyages together with his readings of Shakespeare and Hawthorne, Melville came to a firm belief that there are two contrasting sides in human life, one light and the other dark. It was deplorable, in Melville's way of thinking, that most of his fellow men, having lived too long in the safe, well-ordered world of modern civilization, were only conscious of the light, cheerful side of life (in the line of Emerson and Whitman), forgetting the larger part hidden behind it—the existence of the dark, unfathomable mystery of life. It was in order to face such mystery, or to grasp "the ungraspable phantom of life" that Melville took to the ship as a sailor, and later returned to this experience again and again through his fiction. Precisely for the same reason, Melville, unlike Whitman, was reluctant to use his life on land as a New Yorker in his significant works except in part of Pierre, and "Bartleby, the Scrivener."

Now before we go into the close analysis of "Bartleby," we might take a look at the beginning part of Moby Dick, where Melville makes a brief observation on the life of New York in the voice of Ishmael, his narrator-sailor. After having explained about the wholesome effect of the ocean upon human beings, Ishmael turns his eyes to the port of Manhattan and states as follows:

There now is your insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs—commerce surrounds it with her surf. Right and left, the streets take you waterward... Look at the crowds of the water gazers... Circumambulate the city of a dreamy Sabbath afternoon... What do you see?—Posted
like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries... But these are all landsmen, of week days pent up in lath and plaster—tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks. How then is this? Are green fields gone?

Just like Whitman does in his poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Melville presents here a picture of the crowds of New Yorkers around the port of New York on a Sunday afternoon. However, in sharp contrast to the lively atmosphere of Whitman’s poem, lifelessness or lack of motion is what pervades Melville’s passage. Unlike Whitman’s crowds who, in their constant motion, seem to be marching toward ultimate immortality, Melville’s crowds of “mortal men” are “like silent sentinels,” “fixed in their ocean reveries.” It should be noted that those crowds of water-gazers who, when Sunday over, have to get back to their work, “tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks” are depicted as white-collar workers. Thus, we might say that while Whitman regarded New York chiefly as the city of common working people, Melville tended to regard it as the city of white-collar people. This is also supported by the fact that Melville’s only work dedicated to exploring the life of New York, namely, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” is an account of white-collar workers made from a white-collar worker’s point of view.

“Bartleby, the Scrivener, a Story of Wall Street” is one of the several short stories, written during 1852 to 1856 and later collected into one volume under the title of Piazza Tales. Even considering the fact that it takes a form of a short story rather than a full-length novel, “Bartleby” is a very different sort of work from Moby-Dick or Mardi. There are no heroic figures like Ahab or Mardi, nor any of the glamorous passages describing the ocean or the primitive islands. Neither are there any of the deep speculative thoughts extended in what the author called “a bold and nervous
lofty language." Written in an easy, matter-of-fact language, "Bartleby" is a singularly neat, well-controlled story lacking in any of the color or vitality characterizing the author's earlier works.

Yet this by no means is to be taken as a sign of the declining creative power on the author's part. As we go on reading the story, we find that the very atmosphere of lifelessness or colorlessness is what the author carefully builds up to present the exact "feel" of his subject-matter, that is, the life in New York city. As a result, the total effect of the story is as powerful as Melville's bulkier works.

As its subtitle indicates, the story of "Bartleby" takes place in a particular section of New York, Wall Street, the commercial center of the most commercially-minded city in America. Furthermore, most of its action takes place in a very limited part of Wall Street—in a small office situated in one of the numerous huge buildings standing on Wall Street. The office is presented as an extremely grim deadly sort of place resembling "a huge square cisterne", looking at one end "upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious sky-light shaft" of an opposite building, and at the other upon "a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade" of another building. The lifelessness and colorlessness of the place is heightened by the equally colorless personality of the chief of the place who acts as the narrator of the entire story.

His occupation is that of a lawyer dealing with no real characters but with "rich men's bonds and mortgages and titledeeds," an occupation peculiarly suited to the Wall Street District. Cool, prudent, and methodical, he is an eminently "safe" man, seldom losing his temper, complacent with the mild prosperity of his office. It is obvious, then, that Melville presents his narrator as a representative citizen of Wall Street.

Now the lawyer has three employees working under him, all doing the same monotonous work of copying law records. One day,
Bartleby joins them as a newly-employed scrivener. Except that he looks “pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn,” he seems to be an ordinary office worker at first. On his third day in the office, however, he surprises the entire personage of the office by declining the lawyer’s request to check copies by stating bluntly, “I would prefer not to.” From then on the five enigmatic words, “I would prefer not to,” uttered mildly but firmly, become a refrain threatening the whole structure of the well-ordered pattern of life in Wall Street. Each time Bartleby utters these words, his withdrawal from the world around him is furthered, until he finally declares that he has given up his entire career as a scrivener. Bartleby becomes a fixture in the office, forever standing at his window which only faces the blank wall of the opposite building.

The strange behavior of Bartleby exasperates the lawyer naturally. He decides to fire the scrivener time and time again, and yet finds it difficult to do so. Each time he makes his decision, he feels curious compassion toward Bartleby, and at one point he almost determines to let Bartleby stay as long as he wishes. But the voices for conformity raised by Wall Street were too strong for the lawyer to resist, and Bartleby is sent to a prison as a vagrant by officials of Wall Street. When the lawyer visits Bartleby, he finds Bartleby standing alone facing the high wall of the prison yard. A few days later, when the lawyer returns to the prison for his second visit, he finds that Bartleby is dead, rejecting eating food and hence rejecting life permanently. The story is concluded with the lawyer’s following final words: “Ah, Bartleby! ah, humanity!”

Because of the highly symbolical nature of the story, “Bartleby” suggests numerous ways of interpretation. Especially the strange character of Bartleby has been the object of many critics’ concern. A certain critic noted the similarity of Bartleby’s passive resistance to that of Thoreau, while another suggested that Bartleby is a sort of a Christ figure. It is not our present concern to clear up his
enigma completely. We might at least say that, by facing the dead wall permanently, Bartleby was trying to solve the fundamental mystery of human existence which is aptly symbolized by the wall. It should be recalled that this symbol of the wall is recurrent in many of Melville's fiction; in *Moby Dick*, for example, the white whale is called "dead blind wall." Bartleby is, then, like Ahab, (or Melville himself for that matter), trying to penetrate into what is impenetrable—an agent perhaps from the dark side of the universe (the Pacific Ocean) reminding the inhabitants of Wall Street (readers of Melville's works) of the existence of "the ungraspable phantom of life" hidden behind the well-ordered, conventionalized, urbanized world of modern civilization. In his rejection of what the business world demands of him again, Bartleby is like the author himself, Bartleby declining to copy law records and Melville abandoning to write books that are easy to sell. While the rejection leads Bartleby to his physical death, it leads Melville to his death as a writer.

Although Bartleby's gesture of defiance causes no change in the over-all life pattern of Wall Street, the lawyer is at least one character upon whom Bartleby exerts profound influence. When the lawyer-narrator makes that famous utterence at the end of the story "Ah Bartleby! ah humanity!" we find this "model citizen" of Wall Street finally stripped of his conventional standards. No longer an easy comfortable man, he is for the first time in his life facing the same blank wall which continued to vex Bartleby. For the first time the lawyer realizes that a mysterious bond that attracted him to Bartleby stems from the very fact that the lawyer himself is exactly like Bartleby—equally nameless (the lawyer's name is not revealed until the end), equally alone, and equally engaged in an insignificant work, in an equally colorless and lifeless environment. Thus "Bartleby, the Scrivener" forms Melville's powerful indictment against the kind of the society that Wall Street represents. As Whitman saw, and as the lawyer himself saw on his way back
from the office, streets in New York are filled with "bright silks and sparkling faces," but behind the gay mask of the city are hidden hundreds of "Bartlebys" utterly forlorn and utterly solitary. In his depiction of the alienated figures of white-collar workers in urban environment, Melville was a distant ancestor of modern writers, such as, Franz Kafka and Nathanael West.

Notes:

(1) Russel Blankenship, American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1949), pp. 244-246
(2) Mary Booth's remarks about New York were cited in Popular Culture and Industrialism ed. by Henry Nash Smith (New York: Doubleday & Anchor Co. Ltd., 1967), pp. 166-167
(4) This description on Thoreau is used by Darrel Abel in his American Literature (New York: Barron's Educational series, 1963), p. 121
(5) Walt Whitman, "Song of the Redwood Tree" Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, p. 153
(6) Walt Whitman, "To a Locomotive in Winter" Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, p. 328
(7) Walt Whitman, "Give me the Splendid Silent Sun" Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, p. 223
(8) Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, pp. 116-120
(11) Ibid. p. 23
(12) Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" Selected Tales and Poems ed. by Richard Chase (San Fransisco: Rinehart Press, 1950), p. 93
(13) Ibid. p. 99
(14) Of the numerous analyses of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" that have appeared so far, perhaps the closest, minutest test is Leo Marx's "Melville's Parable of the Walls," Sewanee Review (1953), pp. 603-627
(15) Herman Melville, "Barleby, the Scrivener" Selected Tales and Poems, p. 110