A PROGRESS OF THE DESIRE: THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS IN

HERMAN MELVILLE'S "THE PIAZZA" AND "BARTLEBY, THE SCRIVENER"

by

ESTHER ARNOLD

(Under the Direction of Douglas Anderson)

ABSTRACT

In this paper I discuss the melancholy nature of happiness in two short stories by Herman Melville, "The Piazza" and "Bartleby, the Scrivener." Applying Melville's passage from *Moby-Dick* on the "conceit of attainable felicity" as well as Thomas Hobbes's statement on the "progress of the desire" from *Leviathan*, this essay traces the "pursuit of happiness" of the main characters in these two stories. While analyzing the tales separately, I also argue that they follow a similar pattern: the friendly narrator of each story sets out to achieve a greater level of happiness, but finds his "pursuit" altered and complicated when he meets an incurably unhappy person. As the narrators try to account for the sad characters they meet, they find that happiness always involves compromise.

INDEX WORDS: Melville, happiness, pursuit of happiness, piazza tales, piazza, bartleby, felicity

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

INTRODUCTION

A famous moment in *Moby-Dick* (1851) calls attention to Herman Melville's interest in the elusive, melancholy nature of happiness. The scene in which Ishmael squeezes lumps of sperm on the Pequod suggests that the pursuit of happiness always involves compromise. Reflecting on his fleeting moment of bliss, Ishmael rhapsodizes:

> Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country; now that I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally. (601-3)

In "The Pursuit of Happiness in Jefferson and its Background in Bacon and Hobbes," Jeffrey Barnouw cites a passage from Chapter 11 of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* that sounds very much like Melville's "attainable felicity" intelude:

> the Felicity of this life, consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied. For there is no such *Finis ultimis*, (utmost aim,) nor *Summum Bonum*, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Moral Philosophers. Nor can a man any more live, whose Desires are at an end, than he, whose Senses and Imaginations are at a stand. Felicity is a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the later. (qtd in Barnouw 237)

Hobbes's passage, like Melville's, expresses the idea that the pursuit of "felicity" can never be fully satisfied. Barnouw explains that the rejuvenating quality of the pursuit of happiness that Hobbes describes was integral to Thomas Jefferson's aims in the Declaration of Independence. The affirmation in the Declaration of the people's ongoing right to alter their government to provide for their "Safety and Happiness" stemmed from Jefferson belief that "it was precisely a safeguard, as well as a virtue, of the new republican government that it was responsive to public happiness" (227). As Barnouw notes, Jefferson "is not asserting that legitimate government has a obligation to provide for the happiness of its citizens"; the emphasis on "pursuit" puts the burden of defining happiness, as well the means of achieving it, in the hands of the people (225). Moreover, part of the pleasure of happiness is the pursuit itself: "Pursuit includes an element of effort, the meeting and overcoming of resistance, which itself gives a certain value to activity" (Barnouw 242).

As warm and reassuring a character as Ishmael tends to be — and without dismissing "the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country" — Melville's passage does not express the spirit of renewal in the quest for happiness as positively as Hobbes's does. While Hobbes's speaks of people "attaining" their isolated objects, Melville's passage focuses on what is unattainable — the inexplicable delight that we may delude ourselves we can achieve. Though sublime moments may bring us close to putting our finger on what that missing element is, the only way to maintain our sanity is to settle for lesser delights.

Hobbes's, "Nor can a man any more live, whose Desires are at an end, than he, whose Senses and Imaginations are at a stand" seems an appropriate lead-in to a

discussion of "The Piazza" and "Bartleby, the Scrivener." In these two stories, Melville introduces us first to a pair of relatively happy characters: the two narrators, who seek a more profound felicity, but never manage to achieve it. These narrators, both of whom have active "Senses and Imaginations," constantly change their plotted courses as they try to bring about their happiness; one object, as Hobbes suggests, leads to another. The "Piazza" narrator tries to make himself a soothing home in the country, while the lawyer in "Bartleby" tries to pursue his work in ways that will give him peace of mind; but both of these pursuits lead to a stream of ends that prove unsatisfying. Since these narrators seek reassurance in their imaginations — the "Piazza" narrator in the idea of a fairyland, and the lawyer in the hope that Bartleby will miraculously disappear — they act exactly as Ishmael warns not to, putting the "conceit of attainable felicity" "in the intellect or the fancy."

When each narrator — who seems to pursue happiness by instinct — meets a person of whom it might indeed be said that his or her "Desires are at an end," he begins to question his individual pursuits. Both narrators comes across lonely, melancholy, and uncanny figures — Marianna in "The Piazza" and "Bartleby" in the story that bears his name. The narrators' longings for companionship and their instinctive compassion incite them to give up the kind of selfish individualism that we associate with Hobbes. As for Bartleby, his demise seems to answer to Hobbes's statement that a man cannot live when his desires are at an end. Bartleby has given up on moving "from one object to another" in search of satisfaction. Marianna also stagnates as she sits, tired and weary, at her window, resigned to the tedium of watching the same shadows fall on her house every

day. While Marianna expresses a *desire* to visit the dazzling house she sees in the distance, she cannot motivate herself to pursue that object.

Melville published *The Piazza Tales* in 1856, and the collection was received very well, in spite of the disappointing critical response to both *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* (Silence 92). After the latter novel, he had started publishing short stories in *Putnam's Magazine*, the first of which was "Bartleby" (1853), followed by "Benito Cereno," and others. In *The Piazza Tales* Melville collected some of these previously published stories and added an introductory piece from which he took the title of the collection (McCall, Preface and notes vii, 3). Expansive and allusive though it is, "The Piazza" has received far less critical attention than other stories in the collection.

The narrator's statement in the beginning of "The Piazza" that the country was a "very paradise of painters" (5) has inspired some critics to discuss the relationship between the story and visual art. Robert K. Wallace finds a "critique of American landscape painting" and a "strikingly Turnerian" perspective in the tale,[1] while Barton Levi St. Armand applies the word Mannerist to Melville's treatment of his landscape and themes.[2] Another critic explores the possible influence of Millais's painting of Mariana, based on Tennyson's poem, on Melville's conception of her character.[3] Other essays have discussed literary influences on Melville, including Emerson and Hawthorne. Rather than focusing on one source, Marvin Fisher's discussion of "prospect and perspective" (205) in "The Piazza" covers a range of references, which, he argues, create

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[1] Robert K. Wallace, "Melville After Turner: 'The Piazza,' *The Crayon*, and Ruskin," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 19 (1996): 291, 294.

[2] Barton Levi St. Armand, "Melville, Malaise, and Mannerism: The Originality of 'The Piazza," *Bucknell Review* 30.1 (1986): 72-101.

[3] John M. J. Gretchko, "A Pre-Raphaelite Marianna and a Question of Liberty." *Melville Society Extracts* 82 (1990): 9-11.

the effect of a "verbal picturesque" (209). Critics have also discussed the biographical similarities between the "Piazza" narrator and Melville, including his house in the Berkshires and his experience at sea.

Readers have observed that "The Piazza" serves as a framing device for the other stories in *The Piazza Tales*. Michael Clark argues that despite coming first, however, "The Piazza" is not a typical preface. Clark says that by the time Melville published this collection, he had stopped writing explicit prefaces, preferring to let his artistic intentions speak for themselves (70-71). Despite its ramblings and eccentricities, "The Piazza" does have a storyline, culminating in the narrator's visit to Marianna's cottage, and the conflicts their meeting creates for him. But the tale also serves a practical purpose, providing an excellent jumping off point for stories like "Bartleby." Since "The Piazza" ends with the narrator in a state of remembering "Marianna's face, and many as real a story" (17), we can easily imagine this dreamy narrator reliving each of the stories in the collection in his mind as he sits on his piazza. And like every piece in the collection except for "The Bell-Tower," "The Piazza" has a first-person narrator.

Steven Frye argues that the "*Piazza Tales* should not be considered a 'collection' of discrete units which bear no relation to the tale as a whole. The tales involve the aesthetic framing of distinct viewpoints into dialogic unity, functioning as an elaborate system of commentaries and counter-commentaries, of historically and culturally grounded 'perspectives' and 'counter-perspectives'" (40). Applying Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on novelistic heteroglossia, Frye says that in order to hear the many voices in Melville's *Piazza Tales*, it is important to engage with the entire "story cycle" (41). As part of his analysis, Frye discusses the dialogue he hears between "The Piazza" and

"Bartleby." He draws comparisons between the narrators, suggesting that the lawyer seems like the "Piazza" narrator shifted to a "commercial" setting, where he loses his ability to "mythologize" the landscape" (45). While Frye's discussion covers various dialogues throughout *The Piazza Tales*, I intend to focus specifically on the similarities between "The Piazza" and "Bartleby," which of all the stories in the collection, bear the closest similarities in plot and narrative style.

Melville wanted "The Piazza" and "Bartleby" to be side by side. In a letter to his publisher, Melville specified that they should come first and second in the book, respectively.[4] While it could be argued that Amasa Delano shares qualities with the narrator of "The Piazza," the two nameless speakers of "The Piazza" and "Bartleby" seem to beg comparison even more since they find themselves in such similar predicaments. Both begin their narratives by describing their desire for calm, retired lives; while we might apply this longing for ease to Amasa Delano as well, his occupation distinguishes him from the other two men, one of whom longs for an "easy chair" and the other for a "snug retreat." The cast of characters, moreover, is more complicated in "Benito Cereno" than in the other two stories. Including Delano, we have a trio of main characters, and the other two of these, Babo and Don Benito, have a more interesting dynamic than the narrator has with either of the men he encounters. "The Piazza" and "Bartleby," however, both focus on a pair of characters: the "Piazza" narrator and Marianna, and the lawyer and Bartleby. The narrators in these two stories also spend a great deal of time in private contemplation, the "Piazza" narrator

[4] Dan McCall's notes to "Bartleby" in *Melville's Short Novels* suggest that this was a conscious change. Before writing "The Piazza," Melville intended to call his collection *Benito Cereno & Other Sketches* and to put "Benito" first and "Bartleby" second. "The Piazza," however, gave him a new title for the book, *The Piazza Tales*, and he wrote his publisher that "Bartleby" should follow directly after that piece, p. 3.

contemplating literature, his voyage to fairy-land, and Marianna, and the lawyer trying to figure out his Bartleby dilemma.

This paper will explore how Melville's narrators in "The Piazza" and "Bartleby, the Scrivener" learn the limitations of their attainable felicity. Neither the "Piazza" narrator nor the lawyer in "Bartleby" projects his "conceit of attainable felicity" onto a family of his own, since, like Ishmael, these narrators are bachelors. To a certain extent, these unattached narrators seem to be pursuing loneliness as opposed to happiness. They isolate themselves; but at times they long for companionship and find little comfort in the odd characters they meet.

Although "The Piazza" comes first, it is important to keep "Bartleby" in mind while discussing the opening story. "Bartleby" casts a shadow over the narrator of "The Piazza" and Marianna, not only because it was written first, but because the "Piazza" narrator's final words imply that he is haunted by stories like the scrivener's. It is fitting in some ways to think of the "Piazza" narrator as the lawyer, recently moved to the country to escape the misfortune he has seen there. Frye interprets the shift to be in the opposite direction, suggesting that when the lawyer comments on his offices being deficient in life, he represents the "Piazza" narrator, disappointed by the loss of his country scene (45). But I hear more occasions in which the lawyer seems to be talking through the "Piazza" narrator than vice versa, the primary reason for this being that the "Piazza" speaker sounds more world-weary to me than the lawyer does before he meets Bartleby. The narrator who is disturbed by the worms inside his Chinese creeper has seen more suffering, I think, than the lawyer who has sought the "easiest way of life."

The similarities in voice and personality of the two narrators, their bachelorhood, the fact that they both spring from Melville's imagination and experience — and, as I am arguing, their similar quests for personal satisfaction — encourage us to consider them as two versions of the same man. The narrator of "The Piazza" even calls himself a "cit," echoing the urban setting of "Bartleby." Since "Bartleby" describes events that could very well drive a once-complacent "cit" to the country, I will take the risk of conflating these two narrators from time to time.

It is, of course, perfectly conventional from a storytelling perspective for *The Piazza Tales* to open with a framing story that takes place last chronologically in the collection. What is innovative about Melville's arrangement — as it leads us to think of "Bartleby" as an echo from the past of the "Piazza" narrator — is that it puts more of a sting into his interactions with Marianna. Expecting to cure himself of the disappointment of meeting hopeless Bartleby in the city by talking to a "glad mountain-girl" (10), our narrator finds a similarly downtrodden figure. Unable to pursue happiness through the same old means — resting in his cozy, self-contained office — the speaker shifts to a new setting, where he hopes to settle down comfortably; but he winds up replaying a similar scenario.

Taking the parallels between the stories into account, "The Piazza" suggests that the country can be just as lonely as the city. The urban narrator seeks felicity in the country, only to find that there is no more satisfaction there than there was in the big city. When our narrator finds the same unhappiness in both settings, nature no longer seems such an effective means of escape. It is troubling, moreover, that while the narrator of "Bartleby" puts substantial effort into helping the title character, the other incarnation of

the narrator flees Marianna's cottage after giving a few token words of encouragement. When the narrator abandons Marianna, "The Piazza" underlines the narrator's point in "Bartleby" about the "hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill" (34). It's as if his inability to cure the scrivener has discouraged him from getting entangled in benevolent projects later on, or else has caused him to limit his acts of beneficence to a literary realm — *writing* Marianna's sadness, rather than tending to it directly.

CHAPTER 1

"THE PIAZZA": "BAFFLED SHOOTS GROPING AWHILE IN EMPTY AIR"

The narrator of "The Piazza" surveys a mountain view from a newly constructed piazza at his country house, where he lives alone. An experienced sailor, he relates that despite the beauty of the scene, he feels as lonely and isolated as if he had not seen land in days: "the vastness and the lonesomeness are so oceanic, and the silence and the sameness, too, that the first peep of a strange house, rising beyond the trees, is for all the world like spying, on the Barbary coast, an unknown sail" (7). Fascinated by a distant cottage he sees in the mountains, the narrator fuses this site with his hopes of personal fulfillment. He imagines that the mountain scene is alive with magical figures like the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a fancy reinforced when he sees a rainbow near the cottage and thinks "if one can but get to the rainbow's end, his fortune is made in a bag of gold" (9). The pursuit of this illusory bag of gold symbolizes the narrator's pursuit of happiness in the story. Thinking ahead to "Bartleby," we might associate this bag of gold with Wall Street and the pursuit of wealth. But this narrator's quest is not for financial wealth but rather for a magical cure. Having recently recovered from a physical illness, the narrator finds himself downtrodden, and he looks for cheer as medicine for his pressing doubts. Lonesome, restless, and suffering from a heightened sense of human frailty, he visits the mountain cottage, hoping to find gladness and satisfaction.

The narrator's voyage to the cottage is ostensibly a search for pleasant companionship. He hopes that even if he does not find fairies at the house, he will at least meet "some glad mountain-girl; [and] it will do me good, it will cure this weariness,

to look on her" (9). But reaching his destination, the narrator finds another lonely soul in Marianna, a figure borrowed from Shakespeare and Tennyson. Her unhappiness becomes an obstacle to the narrator's pursuit of happiness, not only because she cannot satisfy his longing for a glad companion, but because he becomes distracted in his pursuit by her dissatisfaction. While the narrator's quest has been primarily a selfish one, geared toward satisfying his imagination and aesthetic tastes, upon meeting Marianna he becomes interested in another human's discontent, and that human interest complicates his personal longings. When we discover that Marianna imagines the narrator's house, which she has seen at a distance, as a happy place, the two characters become mirror images of one another — dissatisfied people caught up in a fantasy of "attainable felicity." So while hoping to find himself in an enchanted mountain realm, the narrator finds himself disenchanted as he gradually realizes that he and Marianna suffer from similar longings and delusions. Marianna both intrigues and disturbs him, acting upon him in much the same way Bartleby unsettles the lawyer. Both antagonists remind the narrators of humans' unhappiness, and of how difficult it is to escape from stifling circumstances. But the lawyer's feelings on "fraternal melancholy" (33) in "Bartleby" go unarticulated in "The Piazza." While the lawyer reaches out to Bartleby repeatedly, the "Piazza" narrator pulls back from Marianna. Ultimately, his imagination seems the only retreat from Marianna's self-destructive inertia.

Given the parallels between the narrator and Marianna — and the fact that they are victims of a similar delusion — we might expect them to comfort one another when they finally meet. Indeed, in many stories, lonely characters such as these do find a common bond, allowing the pursuit of happiness to succeed in unusual, but reassuring,

ways. But in "The Piazza," the narrator and Marianna fail to connect — a sad note of misunderstanding expressed in the central metaphor of the story. As the two characters watch from Marianna's window,

> side by side, some feet apart, nipped and puny, two hop-vines climbed two poles, and, gaining their tip-ends, would have joined over in an upward clasp, but the baffled shoots, groping awhile in empty air, trailed back whence they sprung. (16)

The stunted nature of the "baffled shoots" serves as a reminder of the shrunken and perplexing situation of human beings in nature — a predicament felt most acutely in solitude, but which cannot be assuaged by joining forces with other sufferers. Like one of the shoots, the narrator trails back to his farmhouse feeling powerless to help Marianna, but he cannot forget their meeting: "To and fro I walk the piazza deck, haunted by Marianna's face, and many as real a story" (17). This final sentence establishes "The Piazza" and the other stories within *The Piazza Tales* as attempts to memorialize haunted, haunting individuals through storytelling. We can easily fit the lawyer and Bartleby into the hop-vine image, which Fisher calls "so expressive of the frustrated union and difficulty of communion even for people of good faith" (214). The narrator of the "Piazza," like the lawyer, manages to compensate for this failure to connect by telling his story. Both narrators manage to capture their haunting subjects in a literary sense, although they cannot connect by direct means.

Although the narrator may partially soothe his dissatisfaction, and that of his readers, through his storytelling, his tale consists of a series of failures. His move to the country, before the story begins, represents one step in his pursuit of happiness, which

throughout each of its stages, will never seem complete. Indeed, his quest for contentment proceeds much like the "progress" Hobbes describes, advancing from object to object, without yielding full satisfaction. The narrator's inability to find perfect happiness at his country home also echoes a point made by Emerson in "Nature" (1844):

> There is in the woods and waters a certain enticement and flattery, together with a failure to yield a present satisfaction. This disappointment is felt in every landscape. I have seen the softness and beauty of the summer clouds floating feathery overhead, enjoying, as it seemed, their height and privilege of motion, whilst yet they appeared not so much the drapery of this place and hour, as forelooking to some pavilions and gardens of festivity beyond. It is an odd jealousy: but the poet finds himself not near enough to his object. The pine-tree, the river, the bank of flowers before him, does not seem to be nature. Nature is still elsewhere. (271)

Melville's narrator, as the storyteller, and therefore the "poet" in this scenario, dives into nature only to find his view of it unsatisfactory. Throughout the rest of his story, he attempts to bring himself closer to the mountainous landscape that most intrigues him, first by building a piazza from which to gaze on it, and later by going on a Wordsworthian excursion[5] to the mountains. His visit to Marianna's cottage proves unsettling, but it also inspires this poet-narrator to express her unique kind of unhappiness.

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[5] Hershel Parker notes that Melville was reading Wordsworth's poems at the time he wrote the stories in *The Piazza Tales*, and that he found a "new, and specifically Wordsworthian, way of thinking about himself, nature and humanity" in these works. *Herman Melville: A Biography*, vol. 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002) 164-65.

The narrator's decision to build the piazza is one in a series of moves based on the hope that if he only could get a little closer to things — to nature, to the mountains, to fairyland — he would be happy. Although the narrator observes that the setting is so lovely that painters overwhelmingly choose it for their landscapes, he expresses in his first sentence the "deficiency" (5) of his house: it lacks a piazza from which to admire all this natural beauty. He compares his desired piazza to a bench in an art museum, "for what but picture-galleries are the marble halls of these same limestone hills? — galleries hung, month after month anew, with pictures ever fading into pictures ever fresh" (5-6). The narrator looks forward to making this mountain view into his personal museum. His metaphor calls attention to the changeability of nature, and his desire for a piazza suggests a longing to capture the short-lived images he will see from his seat. For, as opposed to pictures in museums, which should be preserved after being taken off the walls, the narrator's views of nature will fade entirely once they are replaced by other living pictures. The desire to capture fleeting landscapes through painting is analogous to a writer's need to commit intriguing characters and moments to the page.

Moreover, the narrator's longing echoes a second passage in "Nature," in which Emerson writes about landscapes as pictures that are always replacing themselves, and argues for the pleasant quality of this perpetual change of scene:

> How easily we might walk onward into the opening landscape, absorbed by new pictures, and by thoughts fast succeeding each other, until by degrees the recollection of home was crowded out of the mind, all memory obliterated by the tyranny of the present, and we were led in triumph by nature. ("Nature" 261)

By associating frequent changes of view with frequent shifts in thought, Emerson paints nature as a place of peaceful forgetfulness, where one can escape from one's worries. The narrator of "The Piazza" never tells us about his past, besides alluding to his sea adventures. He never mentions a family or any attachments, and his move to the country suggests that he has the freedom to indulge his own wants rather than tending to the needs of a family. His apparent bachelorhood permits him to embrace distractions and start fresh. These considerations lead me to further indulge the idea that this narrator is awfully like the lawyer of "Bartleby" — longing to forget the unhappy scrivener by means of this self-exile, and through the pleasant distractions of a natural landscape.

The "Piazza" narrator tells us he is from the city; and coming from an urban setting where he can see natural scenes only on museum walls, the narrator attempts to view nature firsthand from his piazza. In choosing the real landscape over the translations of a painter, he seeks truer, more vivid images than one can see in an art gallery. His longing for a truer perspective will come back to haunt him when he finds his eyes opened to human suffering, rather than aesthetic beauty. On closer inspection, the narrator finds that his dazzling view of Marianna's house was a mirage, and his conceptions of a "glad mountain-girl" betray him in the same way.

Of the living pictures he sees from his farmhouse, the narrator takes a special interest in Greylock, a mountain Melville could see from his family's home in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he wrote *The Piazza Tales* (Parker 164). The narrator compares Greylock to Charlemagne (5), indulging a fascination with royalty that inspires him to build his piazza on the north side of his house. In a pleasant moment of self-deprecation, the narrator tells us that during the construction of his piazza the builders "scouted at the

greenness of the cit, who would build his sole piazza to the north" (7). Later comments by neighbors suggest that the community finds the narrator eccentric, or at least overly romantic, in his tastes, as when one person quips: "'Wants, of winter midnights, to watch the Aurora Borealis, I suppose; hope he's laid in good store of Polar muffs and mittens'" (7). The narrator appears pleasantly indifferent to these gibes, caught up in his enthusiasm for nature and, as Frye notes, for mythology (43-44). While the neighbors, who are accustomed to the landscape, express the practical view, the narrator develops as a fanciful character, concerned with beauty and magic. And the dreamy qualities of the Aurora Borealis evoke the spirit of wonder he is hoping to capture.

Northern lights or no, the narrator becomes entranced watching the sunlight play on the mountains to the North. Armed with an easily triggered sense of awe, he considers the construction of a piazza at his new home essential because "beauty is like piety — you cannot run and read it; tranquillity and constancy, with, now-a-days, an easy chair are needed" (6). The comparison of the piazza to a cozy piece of furniture invokes the leisure the narrator hopes to indulge in while surveying the natural scenes around his home. We will see this longing for ease echoed in "Bartleby," of course, when the lawyer explains that his professional philosophy is directed towards the "easiest way."

The narrator's descriptions of the landscape evoke a pleasantly ambiguous blend of reality and fantasy, very much in the spirit of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which he tells us he is reading (9). He says of his "inland voyage to fairy-land," meaning his trek to Marianna's cottage, that it is "A true voyage; but, take it all in all, interesting as if invented" (7). Arguing that his story is "true," he does not belabor the reality of the events he will describe, and he invites his readers to accept his story as "no more yielding

but a dream" if they so desire. He savors his feelings of enchantment, exemplified by his interest in fairies and the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

But the "Piazza" narrator finds his easy chair inadequate to his pursuit of happiness, as the lawyer discovers that the "easiest way" will not satisfy him. The narrator's easy chair, his piazza, which is so important to him at first, fades in prominence as he becomes increasingly curious about Marianna's house in the mountains and projects his happiness there. Having lost some of his original enthusiasm, the narrator does not describe the piazza itself, which serves rather as a vantage point, a playground, and, more importantly, a stepping stone in his pursuit of happiness. Although the narrator retreats to it in the end, the piazza is not an "end" it itself. Echoing Hobbes's passage on felicity, the piazza provides the narrator with a view to the mountains that sends him off on a new line of pursuit, based on new hopes.

Again blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, the "spot" in the distance that satisfies the narrator's need for a new objective — one that rests on hopes of companionship — does not become visible to him until "a mad poet's afternoon" (8). His wording suggests a setting that would inspire giddiness in any poet, providing plenty of material for figurative description, and reminds us that the story's setting incorporates both realistic and imaginary, or literary, elements. A couple of hunters the narrator sees seem "guilty Macbeth and foreboding Banquo" (8), a reference that suggests that his journey to the mountains might expose him to misfortune rather than inspire contentment. The smoke in the distance reminds him of "smouldering towns" (8). The world seems alive with historical and literary violence. The narrator notices the "spot" in this haunted landscape when the sun remarkably casts "one small, round, strawberry mole upon the

wan cheek of the northwestern hills. Signal as a candle. One spot of radiance, where all else was shade" (8). While at first he expects building a piazza to be the way to achieve happiness, he now sees this one site in the distance as an end — the key to contentment — in spite of the foreboding imagery that surrounds it. The light is a "signal" to him, like a beacon welcoming him back to land, and his pursuit of this light seems an attempt to grasp the unattainable felicity Ishmael refers to.

Moreover, the narrator compares the hills to a face, and the ray of light to a "mole." Since Greylock represents Charlemagne to the narrator, the mole becomes a symbol of royalty on the face of the king/mountain. A kind of rough Mount Rushmore, the mountain carries a lot of historical importance. Moreover, the magical qualities he ascribes to the spot tease and seduce him. His response at seeing it, "Fairies there, thought I; some haunted ring where fairies dance" (8), reinforces the sense of the land as enticing, animated by fairies as attractive and sensual as Titania. But his longing to go to fairyland recalls the point in "Nature" when Emerson expresses the unattainable quality of natural beauty:

> What splendid distance, what recesses of ineffable pomp and loveliness in the sunset! But who can go where they are, or lay his hand or plant his foot thereon? Off they fall from the round world for ever and ever. (271-72)

To Emerson, who considers one's rapport with his natural surroundings more indicative of royalty than titles or crowns (262), we may assume that the pomp of so-called kings is not nearly as impressive as the "ineffable pomp" of a sunset. Melville's story, with its blending of nature and Charlemagne, combines artificial and natural elements to create a

distant place of wonder and possibility. The image of the interloper into Nature's secrets "falling from the round world" corresponds to a sense of danger in the narrator's journey to fairyland, in spite of his playful descriptions. Although the "Piazza" narrator undermines the seriousness of his journey with a mock-heroic tone, his quest evokes dangerous voyages in *The Faerie Queene*, as well as classical heroes' perilous visits to the underworld. Although the narrator's "inland voyage to fairy-land" (7) seems less risky than his trip to Cape Horn in December (7), he will return from his encounter with Marianna plagued by doubt.

The narrator is not impelled to go find the spot immediately. The May after the "wizard afternoon in autumn" (8) when he first sees it, he finds a greater incentive to leave home, however. From his piazza, he sees individual rain-showers at different locations in the mountains; and then he sees a rainbow, making him recall the magical potential of the setting: "Fairies there, thought I; remembering that rainbows bring out the blooms, and that, if one can but get to the rainbow's end, his fortune is made in a bag of gold" (9). One gets the sense that the narrator is eager to write himself into an archaic, fantastic yarn. Moreover, at this point in the story, his pursuit acquires a monetary angle. While earlier on the narrator briefly laments that he does not have the funds to build a piazza all around his house, and therefore must limit himself to building on just one side (6), here he brings up the pot of gold — an object that promises to end financial cares:

> Yon rainbow's end, would I were there, thought I. And none the less I wished it, for now first noticing what seemed some sort of glen, or grotto, in the mountain side; at least, whatever it was, viewed through the rainbow's medium, it glowed like the Potosi mine. (9)

In describing his reactions, the narrator acknowledges the deceptive qualities of rainbow, preparing us to find that he has been fooled by visual illusions into hoping for riches.

Despite the association here between wealth and happiness, the narrator never seems to have literal gold on his mind. Apparently disenchanted with the city, he has distanced himself from the Wall Street mentality that links personal satisfaction with money. The pot of gold in "The Piazza" interests the narrator from an imaginative and symbolic, rather than financial, standpoint, as he sets his sights on a fantastic object, steeped in folklore. Another look at the spot during a "cheery sunrise" (9) leads him to conclude that the place he sees is a cottage with glass windows, "perhaps long vacant and dismantled, but this very spring magically fitted up and glazed" (9). Enchanted by the lovely effects of the spring light, he projects the "cheery" quality of the day onto the house he sees. He likes the idea that an object or person on an attractive spot of land must be happy; a pleasant environment should bring out the most pleasant sentiments in a person who lives there.

In the brief encounter between the narrator and Marianna, we discover that the two of them have similar longings for happiness. Between the narrator's farmhouse and Marianna's mountain cottage, there exists a sort of telegraphic connection, but one with poor reception, so that each person views the other's home through distorted lights and shadows and misinterprets the opposite abode as a happy place. Marianna surveys the distance from her seat at her window, a position equivalent to the narrator's piazza. Like the narrator, she mistakenly interprets the house she sees glimmering in the distance as happy. Indeed, comparatively speaking, it *is* a happy place, since the narrator is much more content than Marianna, whose troubles dwarf his own. The irony of the narrator's

quest lies in his underrating his home to pursue Marianna's, a process that will only undermine his peace of mind. Nevertheless, the story does not seem to encourage the desire to stay put and not pursue greater happiness at all. We see this paralysis in Marianna, who lacks the will to leave home. A melancholy, compulsive character, she differs from the narrator — who, though his journey proves disappointing, repeatedly tries to make himself a happier person.

As opposed to Marianna, the narrator is inclined to put a positive spin on images and experiences. When the narrator arrives at Marianna's cottage, even without the distortions of distance and a "mad poet's afternoon" (8), he assigns magical importance to the most run-down aspects of her house. Despite its decay, he considers this "little, low-storied, grayish cottage, capped, nun-like, with a peaked roof" to be a pristine retreat, with "snail-monks" inhabiting the "velvet-napped" shingles (12). Up-close, the narrator still sees the cottage through rose-colored glasses. He attributes the growth of vegetation around the foundations of the house to the "fertilizing charm" (12) of fairyland. When he cites Oberon as his source for the idea that the stones of houses in fairyland have living qualities, the narrator sounds very much like a tourist, thrilled at finding a particular castle or pile of ruins that he has read about in literature.

There is a giddy, romantic quality to his visit at this point that echoes his imaginary travels at sea while sitting on his piazza. His excitement reminds us that we can derive happiness from imagination, as we allow ourselves to dive into literature. For, in some respects, the narrator's voyage to fairyland is a voyage into literature, his projection of himself into the magical worlds of Spenser, Shakespeare, and others. And he thoroughly enjoys the idea of occupying the same space as Spenser's characters,

when, for instance, he notices that "The foot-track, so dainty narrow, just like a sheep-track, led through long ferns that lodged. Fairy land at last, thought I; Una and her lamb dwell here" (12).

The narrator does not find Una, however, but rather Marianna, whose loneliness snaps him out of his reverie. When he meets her the similarities between their longings become evident. Of these two characters gazing at "happiness" from their homes, both feel lonely and envision the owner of the distant, sparkling house as an ideal companion. Nevertheless, the narrator seems far better equipped to deal with, and recover from, loneliness than Marianna. The narrator represents a healthy, imaginative personality, while Marianna seems fragile and worn out by her monotonous days. We know from his sea voyages that the narrator has lived adventurously in the past, and he is venturesome enough to journey to the mountains. However, Marianna is a young woman and an orphan, whose only companionship has been that of a brother so overworked that he is poor company. William Bysshe Stein reads the hop-vine passage as describing how Marianna "wastes away in this isolation and solitude because she cannot fulfil her womanhood" (331). It is adequate, I think, to assume that she is just terribly lonely, to the point of creating friends out of inanimate things. Her cottage is falling apart, and her spirits reflect the bleakness of her home. Dependent on her brother, and lacking the freedom and adventurous instincts of the narrator, Marianna confines herself to the cottage, oppressive as it is to her. Expressing the attitude of "Better feel lone by hearth, than rock" (16), Marianna tells the narrator that she prefers not to walk in the woods, which are "strangers" (16) to her — the shadows that fall upon her dirty window being odd but reliable companions. She sounds a great deal like Bartleby, who when the

lawyer tries to convince him to seek a more satisfying job responds, "'I would prefer not to make any change at all'" (47).

The view from Marianna's cottage window serves as a metaphor for her limited perspective on opportunity. Far from a "fairy queen sitting at her fairy window" (13) as the narrator first envisions her, Marianna reveals that she has grown tired of her view through the window, lovely as it seems at first glance. When the narrator inquires why she no longer enjoys the view, Marianna says that her unhappiness is based on internal feelings rather than any problem with the view itself: "'it is not the view,'" she says, "'it is Marianna'" (13). Marianna senses that there is something wrong with her and that she should not be so unhappy. Nevertheless, she proves too weak to counteract her melancholy in useful ways, falling back on unsatisfying delusions about the narrator's house, which she knows she will not actually visit.

Echoing the references to pots of gold and the Potosi mine, the narrator misunderstands at first why Marianna thinks that a happy person must live in the house she admires. The narrator asks, "'Some happy one . . . and why do you think that? You judge some rich one lives there?'" Marianna responds, "'Rich or not, I never thought; but it looks so happy, I can't tell how; and it is so far away'" (14). The narrator underestimates Marianna's conception of happiness, assuming that she associates it with wealth. But her response reveals the inexplicability of her longings and of his: she, like the narrator, cannot say why the house looks happy; however, they both see this symbol of felicity floating in front of them like a mirage. In his article on Jefferson and the pursuit of happiness, Barnouw explains that, according to Hobbes, no person can decide what any other person's pursuit of happiness will be. Furthermore, "A clear implication

of Hobbes's conception of desire is that even the individual concerned cannot determine, once and for all, the good that he pursues, for defining our ends and interests is itself part of the pursuit" (240). This theory implies that we can often be mistaken in the objects we pursue, and such is the case with both of these characters. The narrator realizes in the course of this dialogue that Marianna's desire to see the house would only disappoint her, as his visit has disappointed him.

But Marianna's resolution to stay put does not bring her peace of mind. The act of looking towards the "happy" house causes her discomfort; as she watches it through a "mirage haze" (13), the sun's light hurts her eyes, and she tries to block it out. When the narrator suggests that the sunrise must flatter her mountain home, Marianna responds, "'This house? The sun is a good sun, but it never gilds this house. Why should it? This old house is rotting'" (14). Marianna cannot believe that her house could ever be "gilded" or appear lovely. She further explains her frustration when the sun shines in through

> "a window I can't keep clean, do what I may — and half burns, and nearly blinds me at my sewing, besides setting the flies and wasps astir — such flies and wasps as only lone mountain houses know. See, here is the curtain — this apron — I try to shut it out with then. It fades it, you see. Sun gild this house? not that ever Marianna saw." (14)

Marianna's belief that these insects prefer "lone mountain houses" seems doubtful; most likely, Marianna has lived here for so long that she believes the annoyances she finds are specific to her house. And yet, she cannot bring herself to consider leaving the cottage that annoys her so much. She remains dedicated to her "dull woman's work" (16), a

dedication reinforced by her use of an apron as a curtain to block out the sun. Nor is Marianna inclined to choose a different spot for her sewing that will not hurt her eyes; like Bartleby at his "dead-wall," she is both fascinated by and sick of the view. Moreover, her occasional habit of speaking of herself in third person adds another touch of eccentricity. Her statement of her problem as "'it is not the view, it is Marianna'" (13) sounds almost as oddly comical as "'I would prefer not to.'"

Curiously, the narrator, who is by far the happier personality of the two, has also forced himself to remain in his seat — his piazza — through uncomfortable conditions. Like Marianna, who stays by her window even when the sun blinds her, the narrator sits on his piazza during rough December weather. His reason for doing so is to indulge his imagination and his memories of seafaring:

> even in December, this northern piazza does not repel — nipping cold and gusty though it be, and the north wind, like any miller, bolting by the snow, in finest flour — for then, once more, with frosted beard, I pace the sleety deck, weathering Cape Horn. (7)

Despite his enjoyment, the narrator pays perhaps for not coming in from the cold when he becomes ill and must stay in his bedroom. Not satisfied to indulge his imagination indoors, the narrator's behavior shows his desire to approximate the conditions of his sea adventures as much as possible. To really feel the cold and the north wind brings him closer to the real thing, he thinks, and this preference foreshadows his decision to go to fairyland. Imagination, the story implies, needs genuine sensations to nourish it, just as beauty needs an easy chair and churches need pews (6); and approximating the real thing may involve self-deprivation. Unlike the narrator, Marianna does not look for adventure

through imagination. When she fancies that the clouds *are* what their shapes resemble, her imagination remains static and work-a-day; she expects the same clouds every day, becoming so used to their patterns that she does not even have to watch them anymore.

But the narrator's melancholy has become evident before his trip, and like Marianna's shadows, a natural image calls his sad feelings to mind. While sitting on his piazza on a lovely day, during his recovery:

> [I] was become so sensitive through my illness, as that I could not bear to look upon a Chinese creeper of my adoption, and which, to my delight, climbing a post of the piazza, had burst out in starry bloom, but now, if you removed the leaves a little, showed millions of strange, cankerous worms, which, feeding upon those blossoms, so shared their blessed hue, as to make it unblessed evermore — worms, whose germs had doubtless lurked in the very bulb which, so hopefully, I had planted: in this ingrate peevishness of my weary convalescence, was I sitting there; when suddenly looking off, I saw the golden mountain-window, dazzling like a deep-sea dolphin. (9-10)

Though he considers himself an "ingrate" for not appreciating nature, the narrator cannot help recoiling from the corruption and mortality that the worms in the Chinese Creeper remind him of. Looking deeply at the plant does not bring him closer to happiness, but rather to a sharper sense of the decay in store for the plant and for himself. At this moment of intense doubt, he fastens his eyes on Marianna's house, as if it were a dolphin playing in the distance. He hopes to find a "glad mountain-girl" and that "it will cure this

weariness, to look on her" (10). Forgetting that the Chinese creeper pleased him more from a distance, he decides to see the cottage close up.

But lonesome Marianna does not seem happy to have her first visitor in ages. Indeed, the narrator surprises her when he peeks in her door: "She shyly started, like some Tahiti girl, secreted for sacrifice, first catching sight, through palms of Captain Cook" (13), a comparison that conveys a mixture of fear of the unknown and hope of rescue. As Marianna invites the narrator in and takes the opportunity to tell her sad life story, she seems shaky in front of a stranger — desirous of a friendly ear, but unable to converse in a friendly way herself. Betraying her eccentricity, Marianna is periodically distracted from her storytelling and sewing by things that she sees through her window. Perhaps the narrator's visit soothes Marianna — it's hard to tell — but his evasiveness suggests that she makes him uncomfortable. Helmbrecht Breinig observes that the narrator's tone becomes decidedly less "playful" during this scene with Marianna (281). The narrator's suggestions to help her sleep better are friendly, but they fail to get at the depth of her unhappiness. The prescription he suggests — "'to say one's prayers, and then lay one's head upon a fresh hop pillow'" (16) — is trifling, rather like suggesting an aspirin for a amputated leg.

Perplexed by Marianna's condition, the narrator gives up on her: "— Enough. Launching my yawl no more for fairy-land, I stick to the piazza" (17). He has discovered that her intense unhappiness is no cure for his milder case of the blues. She was no "glad mountain-girl" (10), but a sicker and lonelier soul than himself; his sensitivity at seeing worms inside his Chinese creeper (10) is aggravated when he meets such a distraught and hopeless human being. Uncomfortable being so close to her, he distances himself; and

back on his piazza, "Madam Meadow Lark, my prima donna, plays her grand engagement here; and, drinking in her sunrise note, which Memnon-like, seems struck from the golden window, how far from me the weary face behind it" (17). Hoping to get Marianna's weariness off his mind, the narrator tries once again to pursue happiness while tucked away from other people — but with the company of other creatures, sounds, and visions, that will not trouble him with their worries. But he cannot forget Marianna at night, "when the curtain falls" on his "theatre of San Carlo" (17) because then

> truth comes in with the darkness. No light shows from the mountain. To and fro I walk the piazza deck, haunted by Marianna's face, and many as real a story. (17)

In "Nature," Emerson suggests that "innate universal laws . . . while they exist in the mind as ideas, stand around us in nature for ever embodied, a present sanity to expose and cure the insanity of men" (273). Melville's narrator is not so comforted by these "innate universal laws." Journeying to what he hopes will be the source of beauty and happiness, he finds that the object he has sought comes up short — or leads only to a tougher search. Companionship does not satisfy him either, since he finds his hopes of benefiting from another person's happiness shattered after coming upon a thoroughly unhappy character in Marianna. Ultimately, he decides to distract himself with amusement through natural beauty and imagination, rather than counting on "innate universal laws." As Fisher explains, "He returns to the piazza, sadder, no doubt, and wiser, and effects a compromise with the conditions of life" (215). Acknowledging the "conceit of attainable felicity," he distracts himself with the countryside and other simple pleasures; but Marianna's unhappiness sticks with him because, despite their differences,

her hopes echo his own. Perhaps this sympathy with Marianna arouses in him both a sense of relief that his unhappiness is not as extreme as hers, and sadness that a fellow human being has dug herself into such a miserable hole.

Melville's narrator in *The Confidence Man* argues: "That fiction, where every character can, by reason of its consistency, be comprehended at a glance, either exhibits but sections of a character, making them appear for wholes, or else is very untrue to reality" as "no writer has produced such inconsistent characters as nature herself has" (86). This not only serves as a good warning to readers not to oversimplify characters in a text, it also suggests that in the brief period in which the narrator interacts with Marianna, he cannot possibly grasp her entirely — even if we interpret her as a figment of his imagination, and in some degree a reflection of himself. The lesson of this is that a person is as likely to pin down all of an acquaintance's fears and motivations as a painter is to convey all the various aspects of a natural scene — day and night, summer and winter — in one painting. Characters often remain a mystery to narrators in Melville's stories, and perhaps that is why his storytellers often seem haunted by fleeting encounters with odd people — "duck-billed characters" (86) in the words of *The Confidence Man* narrator. The lack of concrete answers about these strange characters does not detract from their truthfulness, much less from their complexity. Still, when Melville's narrators are unable to size other characters up, the result may be their own frustration, and their inability to achieve personal satisfaction.

But although the "Piazza" narrator fails to reach his goals, his eagerness is contagious; and by creating a world alive with literary figures and exciting patterns of light and shadow, Melville provides ample material to draw his readers into this first

piazza tale. Appropriately, the story argues for the joys of reading. When the narrator leaves Marianna's house and decides to commit himself to his imagination, he embraces the sort of pleasure that's to be had through literature. Marianna, on the other hand, does not read at all. Though imagination does not prove fully satisfactory to the narrator — for when he closes his book, he sees her face — the ending suggests that reading is, to borrow Fisher's word, a good "compromise" (215), and one that Marianna does not take advantage of.

CHAPTER 2

"BARTLEBY, THE SCRIVENER":
"A PROFOUND CONVICTION THAT THE EASIEST WAY OF LIFE IS THE BEST"

The vivid landscapes in "The Piazza," which attract a "very paradise of painters" (5), stand in contrast to the colorless interiors of "Bartleby, the Scrivener." While the narrator in "The Piazza" is a "cit" who has fled to the country, the lawyer in "Bartleby" is a "cit" viewed in his own element. The former escapes as far as an imaginary fairyland, but the furthest the lawyer gets from New York City is the suburbs, where he flees when rattled by Bartleby's refusals. The city has a hold on the characters in "Bartleby," a kind of control illustrated by the confinement of the lawyer's place of business. Early in the story, the lawyer describes the two views available from his offices:

> At one end they looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious skylight shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom. This view might have been considered rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call "life." But if so, the view from the other end of my chambers offered, at least, a contrast, if nothing more. In that direction my windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade; which wall required no spy-glass to bring out its lurking beauties, but for the benefit of near-sighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my window panes. Owing to the great height of the surrounding buildings, and my chambers being on the second

> floor, the interval between this wall and mine not a little resembled a huge square cistern. (19)

If we didn't already know of the disappointments in store for the narrator of "The Piazza" in the country, this shift would seem like a bleak one indeed. Although the lawyer describes the two obstructed windows with humorous cynicism — fitting our expectations of a cosmopolitan, perhaps — the passage immediately suggests that the occupants of this office are shut inside. The claustrophobia of this urban setting is all the more pronounced since, within *The Piazza Tales*, "Bartleby" comes right after "The Piazza" and its magical, expansive landscapes.

The narrator of "The Piazza" encourages us to gaze towards Greylock along with him, but when we switch to "Bartleby," our visual sense is blocked. The colorless, stifling qualities exemplified by the obstructed windows in "Bartleby" serve as obstacles to happiness in the story, obstacles to which Bartleby, in his self-destructiveness, yields. Marianna and the narrator of "The Piazza" look off into the distance, only to be disappointed by illusory pleasures they see there. In "Bartleby," the imaginative impulse — represented by the "Piazza" narrator's longing gaze into "fairy-land" — is cut off by the lifeless brick and concrete of the city. While the views from the piazza and from Marianna's window give false hope, the perspectives available from the lawyer's office windows give no hope at all — not even providing a glimpse of the Wall Street traffic outside.

Despite the oppressive description, life does exist in these Wall Street offices; and the lawyer and his original staff go about their individual pursuits of happiness there. But Bartleby's arrival interferes with ordinary pursuits in the office, specifically in the case of

our eyes and ears in the story, the lawyer. Unlike the more fanciful narrator of "The Piazza" — who specifically looks for a change of scene, but in seeking enchantment finds dreary Marianna — the lawyer does not want his professional and moral ease to be disturbed. Nevertheless, as the "Piazza" narrator seeks out Marianna, the lawyer searches for Bartleby by means of a newspaper advertisement; and as the other narrator is disappointed to find a girl who threatens to make him sadder, the lawyer finds himself stuck with a scrivener who makes him doubt his confidence in humanity. Both narrators come across characters who deeply trouble them while searching for just the opposite: forgetfulness and peace of mind. The oddball antagonists in these two stories achieve a similar purpose, disturbing the narrators' preconceived notions of happiness. Marianna and Bartleby wrestle the two narrators from their easy chairs, forcing them to reconsider their concerns about their personal satisfaction within the network of human suffering.

Echoing the "Piazza" narrator, who wants his piazza to be an "easy chair" (6), the lawyer introduces himself as

> a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best. Hence, though I belong to a profession proverbially energetic and nervous, even to turbulence, at times, yet nothing of that sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace. I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bond and mortgages and title-deeds. (18)

I find the tone of this self-introduction to be welcome because it is relaxed and slightly self-mocking, like the "Piazza" narrator's or Ishmael's. This is a narrator whom I would not begrudge his happiness, nor would I deny myself the pleasure of his humor and sympathy. I agree with Dan McCall who encourages us to read the lawyer as a sincere, trustworthy figure: "extremely intelligent, whimsical and ironic, generous, self-aware, passionate, and thoroughly competent" (*Silence* 102). [6] Not claiming the ability to keep any and all worries from disturbing him, the lawyer admirably suggests that work-related troubles are not worth losing one's head over. He introduces himself as a more-or-less satisfied man, who has adopted a professional strategy that he believes will give him peace of mind. He takes pride in his ability to keep his calm and avoid the nervousness often associated with practicing law, a calm that will, of course, be tested more by Bartleby than by any lawsuit. Mordecai Marcus interprets the lawyer's "easygoing detachment" as "an attempt at a calm adjustment to the Wall Street world, an adjustment threatened by Bartleby's implicit, and also calm, criticism of its endless and sterile routine" (109). Though the lawyer seems to have made this "adjustment" years prior to the events of this story, and though his interactions with Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut do not strike me as "sterile routine," the lawyer surely becomes more aware of the oppressive potential of the city after he sees Bartleby suffering beneath it.

While the Wall Street setting and allusions to John Jacob Astor remind us that the pursuit of happiness in this story overlaps with the pursuit of wealth, the lawyer's objectives are geared more towards obtaining a sense of calm than amassing riches. To

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[6] McCall's chapter in *The Silence of Bartleby* called "The Reliable Narrator" refutes what he describes as the majority opinion that the narrator is neither reliable, nor sympathetic. He effectively counters numerous attacks against the lawyer that accuse him of, for example, complacency, selfishness, and a lack of intelligence.

be sure, his ease depends in part on his professional success, and so he regrets losing the Master in Chancery position — "not a very arduous office, but very pleasantly remunerative" (19). But the lawyer in no way expresses a longing to be like his rich clients; he values a "snug retreat" over great wealth — the kind of coziness and freedom from worry that the very rich must often sacrifice. As Leo Marx says, "we are made to feel [the narrator's] mildness, his good humor, his satisfaction with himself and his way of life" (241).

Marx also calls the lawyer a "conservative" (241), but perhaps it is more important to note the emphasis the narrator himself puts on his age. After all, he opens his story by saying "I am a rather elderly man" (18). His actions in the story reveal a desire for a cozy old age; no longer concerned with moving up in business, he wants to be comfortable and free from annoyances. His apparent bachelorhood, a quality he shares with the narrator of "The Piazza," underlines his desire for solitary ease and self-possession. His concern for Bartleby, however, robs him of his sense of comfort. As he feels increasingly responsible for his curious new employee, he loses the freedom and ease of the typical carefree bachelor. And as he loses his hold on the "easiest way of life" and becomes more dependent on Bartleby, he adopts a more challenging way of life, but one that is more satisfying for its emotional investments and complications.

The lawyer's way of looking at the world at the beginning of the story becomes clearer by contrasting it to the perspective of his employee Nippers. The latter illustrates the pursuit of happiness as ambition. Although Nippers acts agreeably in the afternoon, his outbursts in the morning often reveal themselves in his "continual discontent with the height of the table where he worked" (21). Nippers, as described by the narrator, is

impatient at having to wait to move up in the law business, and his expressions of discontentment bother the lawyer, who interprets them as symptoms of "diseased ambition": "Nippers knew not what he wanted. Or, if he wanted any thing, it was to be rid of a scrivener's table altogether" (22). Nippers is not completely stifled by the office, for he maintains hopes of moving up in business; however, his dependence on creditors — signaled by his visit from a "dun" (22) — shows that his pursuit is strenuous, which could help to explain his disagreeable moods. In contrast to young, ambitious Nippers, the lawyer has reached a comfortable place in his career, and he wants to stay put; his initial pursuit of happiness does not involve a longing for change, but rather for stasis. He does not gaze toward an imaginary fairyland like the narrator of "The Piazza," for he thinks he can get everything he desires within the "snug retreat" of his business.

Turkey's and Nippers's mood swings serve as preliminary tests of the lawyer's self-possession, and although the lawyer is comforted by the fact that the two copyists never annoy him at the same time of day (23), he seeks to neutralize their irksome qualities, and increase his ease, by hiring a man like Bartleby:

> After a few words touching his qualifications, I engaged him, glad to have among my corps of copyists a man of so singularly sedate an aspect, which I thought might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey, and the fiery one of Nippers. (24)

Bartleby appears to be a solution not only to the increased workload in the lawyer's office, but also to the troublesome personalities that disturb his peace of mind. He assumes that Bartleby, unlike Turkey and Nippers, will work for him without complaining or acting out; and his confidence in his new hire shows when he "resolved to

assign Bartleby a corner by the folding-doors, but on my side of them, so as to have this quiet man within easy call, in case any trifling thing was to be done" (24). Despite keeping the other scriveners on the opposite side of this partition, the lawyer places Bartleby quite close to his "snug retreat." When he surrounds Bartleby's workstation with a folding screen, he congratulates himself that he has managed to "entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice," for "thus, in a manner, privacy and society were conjoined" (24).

The lawyer recalls taking pleasure in this apparently ideal configuration, and in his heightened sense of authority over his office. He tells us that according to his "humor" (24) he opens the doors to the scriveners' side of the office, reveling a bit in his position as master of these chambers — just as he enjoys having the title of Master in Chancery (19). In this sense, he resembles the narrator of "The Piazza," who idolizes Charlemagne and imagines himself sitting on a "royal lounge of turf" (6). To some degree, both narrators like to imagine themselves as kings — a prospect that sounds sumptuous on the surface of things, but that presumably would prove dissatisfying in many respects in reality (or fatal, as the allusion to the poisoning of King Hamlet in "The Piazza" reminds us). H. Bruce Franklin even argues that the lawyer, "as boss of the office, plays god" (179) and that since, according to Franklin, Bartleby may be Christ (176-77), the lawyer may be playing god "with God himself" (179). It is important to keep in mind that the lawyer *is* an employer who may expect his staff to work for him, and that he does not overwork his employees.[7] He is on easy terms with Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut, and he helps them compare copy; moreover, his hiring of

[7] McCall notes that some readers "fail to hear the Lawyer putting to himself his own most profound misgivings about himself. The critics turn his own misgivings against him, as if they came from outside him." *Silence* 121.

Bartleby shows that he is willing to accept that Turkey and Nippers are only productive for half of any workday. Since the lawyer knows, as he tells us his story, that his hopes that Bartleby will perform any trifling task for him will fail miserably, we should recognize that the lawyer is admitting, and mocking, his own complacency here.

The lawyer's design to ease tensions in the office by bringing Bartleby onboard backfire of course, as Bartleby's odd variety of self-possession threatens to rob the lawyer of his self-command. When the lawyer first receives a response of "'I would prefer not to'" (25) from the scrivener, he reacts with disbelief and anger before backing down to Bartleby's "passive resistance" (28). After asking again and receiving the same answer, the lawyer reacts dramatically, his voice "rising in high excitement," and "crossing the room with a stride" (25). Melville creates the effect a mock duel when the lawyer angrily charges at Bartleby, finally sticking the document towards him with a "thrust" (25), and disobeying his own resolution never to allow professional matters to invade his peace. When the lawyer looks into Bartleby's "gray eye dimly calm" (25), he backs down from the fight, the first sign that he is losing his assurance as a voice of authority. The contrast between the lawyer's dramatic outburst and calm Bartleby — "Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him" (25) — makes the lawyer feel foolish and irresolute. He attributes his backing down to Bartleby's singularity: "Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises" (25). But Bartleby gets under his skin, so he chooses to "forget" this conflict "for the present, reserving it for my future leisure" (26). He tries to preserve his ease by avoiding a confrontation with Bartleby.

A bit later, the lawyer relates another attempt to maintain his composure after one of Bartleby's refusals, to a comic effect:

> "I prefer not to," he respectfully and slowly said, and mildly disappeared.
>
> "Very good, Bartleby," said I, in a quiet sort of serenely severe self-possessed tone, intimating the unalterable purpose of some terrible retribution very close at hand. (30)

The lawyer appears to be mocking his own attempts at self-possession with this overblown description. No "retribution" takes place, since the lawyer decides to avoid a tough situation again by leaving work early. This departure foreshadows the lawyer's flight to the suburbs at the point when he fails to talk Bartleby into leaving his old offices, having received complaints from the new tenants (47). The lawyer's verbal and physical avoidance of the scrivener shows his desire to recover his wits after these exasperating run-ins with Bartleby.

But like the "Piazza" narrator, who cannot rid his mind's eye of Marianna, the lawyer has difficulty allowing himself to ignore Bartleby. Practically speaking, until he does something about Bartleby, the lawyer will have to see him at work. Bartleby puts the lawyer in a terribly embarrassing situation when he refuses another request with the lawyer's entire staff watching. Bartleby's "'I would prefer not to'" in front of Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut shocks the lawyer so much that he compares himself to Lot's wife after being turned into a pillar of salt. Facing this public denial, the lawyer makes an effort to assert his authority over his new employee in front of this audience of three; but he cannot challenge Bartleby by any ordinary means:

> With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously from my presence. But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner touched and disconcerted me. I began to reason with him. (26)

It is tempting to doubt the lawyer's certainty that in the case of any other man he would act with determination — after all, we have seen him deal quite indulgently with Turkey already (21); but despite this note of self-approval, the lawyer is quite frank about the strange effect that Bartleby has on him. He does not use the word "unmanned" yet, but his statement that Bartleby "disarmed" him carries some of the same connotations, while expressing his sympathy for the scrivener as well. With increasing sensitivity, the lawyer describes the combination of frustration, curiosity, and concern that he begins to feel toward Bartleby.

Putting off a confrontation with his new copyist, the lawyer becomes obsessed with Bartleby's odd, isolated behavior; the scrivener's mere presence disturbs his peace of mind. Incited by his curiosity and frustration "to regard [Bartleby's] ways narrowly" (28), the narrator tries to figure out this strange character and what, if any, responsibility he has toward Bartleby. The lawyer describes his attempts to flatter himself that he is charitable for tolerating Bartleby, and thereby regain his self-confidence:

> Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. 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. (28)

The narrator admits that at this point he falls prey to selfish motivations and self-righteousness, and I think we should credit him with a degree of honest self-evaluation as does so. The unpleasant hyperbole of his design to "cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval" alone suggests a bitter recognition, in retrospect, of his selfishness. With honorable frankness, he relates that while he was dealing with Bartleby, who had shaken him away from his contented outlook, he had hoped to restore his happiness — even extend it to the level of heavenly satisfaction — by behaving charitably toward the very man who troubled him.

While the lawyer's conception of the good life before the arrival of the scrivener hinges on worldly things, he describes his indulgence of Bartleby in terms of a more ethereal sort of happiness. Of course, despite referring to his soul, the narrator's conception of happiness relates more to self-approval in this life than with bliss in the next; but as he describes himself irrationally reaching for ways to restore his ease, he enlarges his pursuit to heavenly proportions. In Franklin's application of Matthew 25 to "Bartleby" (177-82), he puts the lawyer's growing dependency on Bartleby nicely:

> Slowly the narrator's compassion for Bartleby and his sense of brotherhood with him emerge, and as they emerge we see more and more clearly that the drama involves the salvation of both Bartleby — the poor, lonely stranger — and the narrator — the "safe" man who in many ways represents our world. (179)

Although I do not think "Bartleby" is primarily a story about Christian salvation, I agree that the lawyer's interest in Bartleby makes him realize that his position of ease and safety has not been entirely satisfactory. But although, as Marx says, the lawyer "tends to

interpret the doctrine [of Christian charity] according to self-interest" (247), his charitable impulses ultimately seem linked to something other than a longing for salvation, or for compensation, something more like genuine compassion.

As the lawyer's sympathy crystallizes, it is important that Bartleby throws off the traditional employer/employee relationship. Bartleby refuses to follow the lawyer's orders; in fact, he assumes the position of judge. When the lawyer asks Bartleby if he is determined to refuse his requests, he describes Bartleby's responses thus: "He briefly gave me to understand that on that point my judgment was sound. Yes: his decision was irreversible. (27) Although the lawyer tells us that he has made a judgment, it is clear that Bartleby issues the decree. Faced with such quiet authority, the lawyer, for the sake of his peace of mind, and because Bartleby operates so curiously on his sympathies, permits the man "privileges, and unheard of exemptions" (31).

Since the lawyer cannot condescend to Bartleby in a traditional way, their relationship becomes increasingly complex. The lawyer cannot act charitably towards Bartleby in the detached way that he does towards Turkey, for instance — whom he gives a hand-me-down coat, a charitable act that fails to satisfy either the benefactor or the recipient — because Bartleby puzzles him so much. Bartleby's seeming lack of emotion — the lawyer compares him to a "plaster-of-Paris bust of Cicero" (26) — produces a confusing sequence of emotions in the lawyer. Paradoxically, therefore, the scrivener's apparent lack of humanity triggers the lawyer's very human sympathies, for how can he be happy around such an emotionless person? Perhaps it is seeing the contrast between himself and Bartleby that leads the lawyer to the "agonizing reappraisal of himself" (*Silence* 108) that McCall discusses.

From early in their association, a crucial way in which Bartleby disturbs the lawyer is that his apparent unhappiness interferes with the lawyer's own quest for happiness. The lawyer's first note of dissatisfaction with Bartleby comes when he observes the scrivener's great productivity at writing but laments, "I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on palely, silently, mechanically" (24). Like the narrator of "The Piazza," the lawyer hopes to have glad people around him in order to bolster his level of cheer. Bartleby's persistent melancholy raises the question of whether an employer can expect his workers to be not only productive, but "cheerfully industrious." The lawyer cannot, like the commander of the prisoner-of-war camp in *Bridge on the River Kwai*, demand of those under his authority, "Be happy in your work." The pursuit of happiness implies, after all, a right to one's unhappiness as well. The lawyer knows this, and his discomfort at Bartleby's lack of cheer underlines the fact that happiness is an emotion that depends on other people — that one person's moods feed off those of his companions.

A person who can live and work contently while surrounded by miserable souls is either terribly oblivious or shamefully selfish, and neither of our narrators fits into these categories. The gap between the "Piazza" narrator's optimistic personality and Marianna's pessimistic one drives him back into isolation. Disappointed in his attempts at pleasant companionship, he prefers to forget Marianna's unhappiness — or perhaps to confront it by indirect means, through the other lonely characters in *The Piazza Tales*. While the "Piazza" narrator has limited success at avoiding his unhappy acquaintance — her face still haunts him during the night — the lawyer's business responsibilities and

Bartleby's determination not to leave prevent him from physically distancing himself from the scrivener.

But unlike the "Piazza" narrator, the lawyer, despite his hesitations and delay tactics, tries to help his melancholy acquaintance. Quite quickly, the lawyer even becomes "considerably reconciled to Bartleby" (30) and his odd habits, and the two seem to reach a sort of understanding — contingent on the lawyer not asking Bartleby to do anything but write. But this brief period of compatibility ends when the lawyer discovers that Bartleby has been sleeping at the office. At this point, he uses the word "unmanned" (32) to describe his reaction at having Bartleby casually take possession of his rooms. But although the lawyer at first takes Bartleby's habitation of his offices as an affront, he is soon moved more by pity than by masculine insecurity. The pathetic sight of Bartleby's weak imprint on the sofa leads the narrator to lament, "What miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible!" (32).

Surveying the traces of Bartleby in the office, the lawyer recalls,

> For the first time in my life, a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not-unpleasing sadness. The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! (33)

At this point, the lawyer finds his life becoming notably more difficult. The moments of "not-unpleasing sadness" he has experienced before have apparently allowed him to carry on the "easiest way." The idea that sadness can be pleasing will be important in considering how "The Piazza" and "Bartleby" are satisfying stories to read in spite of the Marianna's and Bartleby's sadness. Unhappiness in a successful literary context can

bring a kind of bittersweet happiness to readers — and perhaps soothe the troubles of a writer. In our two narrators' attempts to come to grips with Marianna and Bartleby, they bring order out of apparently meaningless suffering, balancing some of the harshest elements of their stories with touches of humor and sympathy. In doing so, the narrators — or going back to the source, Melville — may inspire in us a "not-unpleasing sadness."

But the lawyer tells us that his feelings for Bartleby reach far beyond that, wrestling him from any pleasant associations and forcing him to share the "overpowering stinging melancholy" he sees in Bartleby. Overwhelmed by these new feelings, he sets aside the kind of sadness he has experienced before. His rhapsodic delivery of this realization, however, underlines the point that when reconsidered and retold, anguished feelings can produce a bitter kind of pleasure due to their tragic importance. For, in retrospect, doesn't it seem more important for the lawyer to have discovered this "common humanity" and "fraternal melancholy" than to have obtained a comfortable position on Wall Street? While conveying the awful sense of responsibility involved in discovering one's ties to his fellow man, the lawyer no doubt considers his newfound connection to Bartleby to be essential — a kind of epiphany for him. This sublime moment ends with the lawyer picturing Bartleby laid out in a winding sheet, an image that inspires him to focus his efforts more closely on saving this poor man.

Whereas the narrator of "The Piazza" hopes to cure his own illness and emotional sensitivity, the lawyer tries to cure what ails Bartleby, even though these efforts tend to work against his own pursuit of happiness. Of course, his charity is not entirely selfless: healing Bartleby would theoretically help the lawyer too, ridding him of a terrible distraction from his business and his general ease. But perhaps it is more admirable that,

as McCall reminds us, the lawyer proceeds to help Bartleby even though he doubts that he can cure the scrivener (*Silence* 56-57). The lawyer says,

> So true it is that up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but in certain special cases, beyond that it does not. They err who would assert that invariably this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart. Rather it proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill. To a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul be rid of it. (34)

McCall writes, "One of the most interesting dramas of the story is the Lawyer's own helpless intuition that he is not adequate to the challenge of Bartleby, and never has been. His initial boasting about his virtues becomes his tortured exploring of them as weakness and failure" (*Silence* 108). The lawyer does not stick to the "easiest way" when he tends to Bartleby despite knowing that he "was the victim of an innate and incurable disorder" (34), that no amount of charity will get to the core of Bartleby's problem.

Nevertheless, the narrator cannot find happiness by ignoring this melancholy man either. Abandoning Bartleby will not restore his sense of comfort. Nor does he find happiness in religion, his hopelessness about Bartleby making him decide not to go to church. When he resolves to dismiss Bartleby, pay him generously, and tell him "that if in any other way I could assist him, I would be happy to do so, especially if he desired to return to his native place" (34), it seems that being able to do this for Bartleby really would make the lawyer "happy." One can see distant glimpses of a sentimental reunion

between Bartleby and his family, arranged by the pleased and humble narrator; of course, the lawyer does not expect such a happy reunion to take place. As Bartleby denies his charitable efforts, the narrator is further dismayed because Bartleby's "perverseness seemed ungrateful, considering the undeniable good usage and indulgence he had received from me" (35). The narrator's attempts to help Bartleby unsettle him rather than increasing his sense of complacency; tending to Bartleby drains him, and Bartleby's strangeness has a detrimental effect on his office — not only because the word "prefer" spreads like the plague, but because the lawyer's business acquaintances become understandably disturbed by Bartleby's behavior. Bartleby threatens both the lawyer's personal ease and the success of his business, which has formerly been a "retreat."

The lawyer tells us that Bartleby was "a millstone to me, not only useless as a necklace, but afflictive to bear. Yet I was sorry for him" (37). The millstone image shows the lawyer literally held back from his personal pursuits and pleasures by his feelings of responsibility for his scrivener. He cannot help feeling sorry for a man who "seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe" (38); and knowing such a person makes him ashamed of his selfish aims. No longer the man of ease, the lawyer searches for ways to calm himself down: "I strove to drown my exasperated feelings towards the scrivener by benevolently construing his conduct," and "I endeavored also to occupy myself, and at the same time to comfort my despondency" (42). He reminds himself to be patient and looks for distractions to regain some of his confidence, but the outlook looks bleak for gaining anything so ambitious as happiness.

One of his distractions is to read during his leisure time, and he chooses "Edwards on the Will" and "Priestley on Necessity." He finds that reading "induced a salutary

feeling" (42), and he mocks his desire for concrete answers to his difficulties when he applies these two works to his particular situation, declaring to himself: "At last I see it, I feel it; I penetrate to the predestinated purpose of my life. I am content. Others may have loftier parts to enact; but my mission in this world, Bartleby, is to furnish you with office-room for such period as you may see fit to remain" (42). This episode points out that our contentment often depends on self-deceit, and that our moments of relief tend to be short-lived.

When the lawyer decides to move to a different office, he tries to put Bartleby out of sight and mind, comparable to the "Piazza" narrator's decision to return to stick to his piazza to avoid Marianna and other hopeless causes like her. The lawyer hesitates to visit Bartleby at his old office because of his "squeamishness" (45). Since Bartleby is polite, tidy, and from all appearances perfectly offensive, the story suggests that the lawyer's "repulsion" (34) is to Bartleby's despairing soul, not to any outward signs of poverty or ill breeding. Even in the Tombs, Bartleby is "quite serene and harmless" (48) and does not seem to bother anyone. But to the lawyer Bartleby is a stinging reminder of human problems that go far below the surface. "In vain" (45), the lawyer tries to convince the new tenant of his old office, but more so tries to convince himself, "that Bartleby was nothing to me — no more than to any one else" (46). Bartleby does matter to him, and because ours is a "fraternal melancholy" (33), Bartleby should matter to everyone else.

In the lawyer's meeting with Bartleby in the hall of his old office, it becomes clear that Bartleby's pursuit of happiness, if he has one, has no focus whatsoever. Like Marianna, who wishes that she could reach King Charming's palace but will never motivate herself to go there, Bartleby listens to and acknowledges the lawyer's

suggestions about finding a more suitable job, but he stalls in a perpetual stream of "I would prefer not to"s. Unlike the "piazza" narrator, however, who decides for Marianna's sake to leave her to her delusions, the lawyer invites Bartleby home with him, actively trying to draw him out of his stupor. When Bartleby expresses his determination "not to make any change at all" (47), the lawyer, like the "Piazza" narrator when he takes his yawl back home, jumps in his rockaway and escapes from the city.

After Bartleby's arrest, Marx sees a "clear if muted note of affirmation" in the green grass of the Tombs that gives a sense of life amidst all the sterility of the prison and the city (253-54). The lawyer tries to soothe Bartleby and himself by drawing attention to the life — the soft imprisoned turf — that manages to spring up inside the walls of the Tombs. In some sense, this idea of life springing up from death — from within the Tombs — is antithetical to the "Piazza" narrator's description of his flourishing Chinese creeper that is teeming with worms. The lawyer's quiet response to the grub-man that Bartleby sleeps "With kings and counsellors" (50), is calming; he seems to say, "Rest in peace, Bartleby" on behalf of us all.

But as the narrator of "The Piazza" is haunted by Marianna, the lawyer cannot let go of his thoughts of Bartleby. His mention of the "meagre recital of poor Bartleby's interment" (50) intrudes on the calm of "With kings and counsellors" with a quality that touches on anger and indignation for how the world has ruined Bartleby. While the Dead Letter Office story seems in part "helpless reaching, what a baffled and hurt man would do" to find meaning (Silence 77), this explanation provides very limited comfort for the narrator. While providing some sense that Bartleby's fate was tragically appropriate, the Dead Letter Office leads the narrator to dreadful doubts about humankind. The perpetual

failure of human beings to reach one another is represented in the image of the undelivered letter: "Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring: — the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave" (51). In this image of the bare and rotting ring-finger, we see in quite violent and unsentimental terms the failure of one of Ishmael's means of attainable felicity, the marriage. This grotesque picture of death and decay coincides with the "Piazza" narrator's Chinese creeper, and his baffled shoots, groping in empty air. Although the narrator cannot account for his strong feelings for the scrivener, he finds Bartleby's fate tied up with his own longings — and Bartleby's death to be a sign of how unattainable those longings are. Like the other narrator, however, the lawyer unburdens himself of confusing emotions through poetic imagery.

Since the scrivener refuses the lawyer's help, and seems to have an ambivalent attitude towards the law office — preferring to stay there, but not to work there — the question becomes, what does Bartleby want? What could possibly be his conception of happiness? In refusing to do work that he dislikes, is Bartleby pursuing happiness in his own way? Is he, like the lawyer, trying to afford himself some control over his circumstances? Or, is he a person who has given up on the possibility of happiness altogether? If, as the lawyer first supposes, Bartleby is incapable of emotions like "uneasiness, anger, impatience" (25) then perhaps Bartleby is numb to pleasant feelings as well. Though Bartleby retains his strength of will by refusing to work, his behavior is fatalistic, directed towards no satisfying end, but rather a dead end. As Leo Marx notes, we must consider that besides falling victim to society, Bartleby may have brought on his own cruel demise (250-51). From all appearances, there is nothing positive or life-affirming in his demeanor or his course of action, or rather inaction. The story leaves his

motives a mystery, even if we accept the Dead Letter Office story.[8] Personally, I like Alfred Kazin's open-ended thoughts on Bartleby:

> I do not know who Bartleby was. I have always thought he was the stranger of the city, in an extreme condition of loneliness, and the story a fable of how we detach ourselves from others to gain a deeper liberty and then find ourselves so walled up by our own pride that we can no longer accept the love that is offered us. (76)

It is interesting to wonder whether Bartleby take a shine to this particular office, or this particular lawyer. He leaves "Bribes" (44) for the lawyer under his paper-weight at the office, presumably as a way of paying rent to occupy the place. Is he drawn to the lawyer's personality, and does want to reach out to him? Does he feel betrayed when the happier man allows him to be taken to prison? McCall's observation that "Everybody else hears only what Bartleby says; the Lawyer hears the silence in it" (Silence 153) supports the idea that these two men are inexplicably drawn to each other.

We may read Bartleby's "'I know you . . . and I want nothing to say to you'" (48) to the lawyer as an indictment, and one that could easily force the narrator to reevaluate his prior actions toward Bartleby. Reconsidering Bartleby's habit of staring at the wall behind his window perhaps leads the lawyer to regret putting Bartleby's desk in front of this obstruction. Unknowingly, he may have put the scrivener in a situation likely to aggravate his melancholy moods. In his essay about the walls in Bartleby — which ranges from the literal walls in the office to the importance of the name Wall Street — Marx says that they stand for the figurative walls that "hem in the meditative artist and

[8] McCall notes, "Even if the Dead Letter Office career of Bartleby is 'true,' something was wrong with Bartleby when he went there"; the job would have only aggravated a problem he already had. *Silence* 133.

for that matter every reflective man" (241). In his model, Bartleby represents Melville in his refusal to gratify his public's demands while writing *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* (246). "As a writer," Bartleby "has become paralyzed by trying to work in the shadow of the philosophical problems represented by the wall" (Marx 246), and his self-destruction may be "symptomatic of the perhaps morbid fear of annihilation manifested in his preoccupation with the dead-wall" (250). Whether or not he stands in for the artist, Bartleby certain seems "paralyzed" by the wall at his window, and by the walls in the Tombs, giving the lawyer good reason to unite the words "dead" and "wall" ("Bartleby" 42).

The lawyer does not expect someone of Bartleby's temperament to have any sort of repulsion to the tedious work of verifying copy, or to the strain of working in a claustrophobic environment. Ignorant that he could be doing any harm, he puts Bartleby's desk up against the window in his offices that looks out on the wall of an adjacent building, providing just a bit of light from above the two edifices. Although this is perhaps the spot in the office that affords the closest thing to a view of the outside, this obstructed window also seems like an awful tease. It is worse perhaps to have a window that provides no visual satisfaction than to have no window at all. Even the "grimy back-yards and bricks" (24) that the view used to reveal sound more appealing than the blank oppressiveness of the newer wall that stands three feet from the window. The few rays of light that slip through, "as from a very small opening in a dome" (24), offer painful reminders of the world outside the tedious law office.

Of course, we have no clue what Bartleby thinks of this view; but his "dead-wall reveries" (42) suggest a dreary fascination with this unsatisfying window. Regardless of

whether the wall makes Bartleby's condition worse, the lawyer, as he reaches for explanations, must consider the possibility that he has inadvertently made Bartleby even more unhappy — a prospect that taints his memory with feelings of guilt and regret. What, after all, could be better suited to disturbing the happiness of a kind man than the nagging fear that he has made another person suffer? These doubts put his attitudes before Bartleby's arrival into relief: The lawyer had never seemed troubled personally by the lack of a view from his office, for although he describes the two windows in his chambers, he never expresses the wish that he had a better view through them. But in telling the story after Bartleby's death, he becomes more aware of the windows, and he puts great effort into describing their shortcomings.

It is significant, perhaps, that besides John Jacob Astor, Bartleby is the only person in the story with a name.[9] The other inhabitants of the office — Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut — are identified only by their nicknames, and the narrator never names himself. As a result, Bartleby's name individualizes him. In a story full of nameless people — set in a huge and impersonal city — Bartleby stands apart and, in his isolated way, holds onto his human distinctness. Bartleby's passive resistance perhaps constitutes a limited victory over the dehumanizing effects the city. Franklin sees Bartleby's victory as a spiritual withdrawal from a fallen world (183), while Marx interprets his disobedience as that of an artist dedicated to his creative vision. Gregory Jay argues that Bartleby "occupies the very premises of the law, disobediently. He refuses the social contract, disbands the state by withdrawing his signature from its constitution" (22).

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[9] McCall's notes in *Melville's Short Novels* explain that in the version of "Bartleby" published in *Putnam's* in 1853, the grub-man was called "Mr. Cutlets," but in the version published in *The Piazza Tales*, he was simply called the "grub-man," p. 3. My text includes "Mr. Cutlets," but I still don't consider him a character with a name, since it is obviously allegorical. It is certainly not a name like "Bartleby" is a name.

Moreover, Bartleby's end may be interpreted as a transcendentalist's refusal to give in to a materialist world.[10] I suppose that by *preferring not to*, Bartleby transcends the oppressive expectations of the business world, although this self-assertion does not seem to bring him any happiness.

I find it a bit surprising how easily many critics who celebrate Bartleby and chide the lawyer manage to ignore Bartleby's startlingly odd qualities. Would any of us really want to model ourselves after Bartleby? Would we prefer to be in his shoes than in the lawyer's? Bartleby certainly deserves our interest and sympathy — and, as McCall writes, we can cheer for him because he "stands for our instinctive revulsion from all the commands of the world to 'behave'" (Silence 145) — but he is also isolated, eccentric, humorless, and deeply scarred. And in order to be invested in Bartleby as a character, we do not need to punish the lawyer for making the most of his circumstances.

While McCall perceives of the lawyer as a "stand-in for us" as we try to figure out Bartleby (Silence 101), the lawyer becomes an untrustworthy victimizer in Jay's view. Jay insists that "By framing the author and speaking subject inside the law of the text, Melville forces us to judge the lawyer's every statement by reference to the mode of its being: by the lawyer's personal and class interests, age, gender, cultural matrix, and psychological economy. Voice and truth do not in such a system, occupy the same position" (25-26). Acting on behalf of the dominant system, Jay suggests, the lawyer cannot possibly be truthful; in fact, he ceases to be a person and becomes a "modern subject" trying to "contain" Bartleby's "otherness" (26). Such arguments rob us of the touching intimacy between the characters in the story. If Bartleby is rebelling against a

[10] See Christopher Sten's "Bartleby the Transcendentalist: Melville's Dead Letter to Emerson," *Modern Language Quarterly* 35 (1974): 30-44.

particular social entity, that entity needn't be identified and demonized in the person of the harmless lawyer. Moreover, I doubt that "Melville mimics the garrulous bad faith of the state's own representative by making a nameless lawyer his narrator" (Jay 20). Rather, the lawyer's namelessness suggests that similar events could happen to any one of us, even those who aren't lawyers.

In some respects, the narrator's pursuit of happiness fails when Bartleby dies. His longing to cure Bartleby and cheer himself remain unfulfilled, and he is stuck with the burden of knowing that much of humanity is as incurable as Bartleby. The narrator finishes with his moving cry of "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" (51); but we may assume that he picks up somewhere and continues with his pursuits, though he perceives of them differently. We know that he is still a lawyer when he narrates, and that Bartleby's story is one of many histories he knows relating to the scriveners he has encountered during his career. His return to normal practice, post-Bartleby, offers us another bridge to "The Piazza," since it echoes the other narrator's return home after meeting Marianna.

As previously discussed, telling a story can involve trying to make sense of inexplicable suffering; with meaning comes satisfaction and, maybe, "not-unpleasing sadness." For both of our narrators believe that writing and reading can be a means to happiness, or at least a distraction from sadness. The lawyer is concerned that Bartleby does not read for pleasure: "I had never seen him reading — no, not even a newspaper" (33). And Marianna tells her visitor that she never reads (16). It troubles these highly literate narrators to encounter figures who do not embrace words as a way to escape the drudgery of their work — Marianna's sewing, Bartleby's copying. When the lawyer realizes that he has never seen Bartleby reading, he connects that idea with thoughts of

Bartleby "looking out, at his pale window behind the screen, upon the dead brick wall" (33). The lawyer considers it unhealthy that rather than trying to distract himself with books, Bartleby chooses an activity that seems just as unpleasant as copying; the same may be said of Marianna. The two narrators use literature — we know the lawyer reads at least Edwards and Priestley, and the other narrator seems to read everything — to distract themselves when their other pursuits fail. Although "the lawyer is a lawyer — not a writer" (*Silence* 94), we can see how both narrators try through storytelling to soothe their own disappointments and to make sense of the suffering they see in Marianna and in Bartleby.

CONCLUSION

In the Tombs, when Bartleby tells the lawyer "'I want nothing to say to you'" (48), his statement incorporates the interesting phrase, "'I want nothing.'" Those who read Bartleby's separation from the world as triumphant might interpret these words as meaning that he *wants for nothing*, that spiritually and morally he is a complete person. In terms of Hobbes's passage on the progress of desire, however, *wanting nothing* does not amount to completeness, but rather a painful lack of direction and meaning. It means that one's "Desires are at an end." *Wanting for nothing* correlates to the "repose of a mind satisfied" that Hobbes says cannot bring us the "Felicity of this life," there being no such thing as a "*Finis ultimis*." Although it might seem ideal to have all of our wants taken care of, Hobbes argues that it is the process of *wanting* that keeps us alive. There is no ultimate prize in store for us, so the pleasure is in the pursuit itself.

Returning to Melville's story, Christopher W. Sten explains in his article on "Bartleby" and Emerson's "The Transcendentalist" that there is no end in sight for the lawyer in his efforts on the scrivener's behalf: "as the lawyer becomes increasingly less selfish and more sympathetic the scrivener becomes increasingly more self-dependent — more purely Transcendentalist — and less willing to respond to his employer's imperfect fellowship. Like the ideal the scrivener himself seeks, Bartleby is absolutely unattainable; he continues to retreat beyond the lawyer's grasp" (42). The lawyer moves from one object to another as he tries different tactics with Bartleby, and in that sense, his pursuit seems like a "progress of the desire." But this progress, once it centers on Bartleby, can only be described as promoting felicity if we take into account the lawyer's

growing compassion and changing values. Through his experience with Bartleby, the lawyer discovers a new kind of happiness that stems from a closer identification with humankind. Sadly, this sense of fraternity only succeeds in the intellectual realm, as the lawyer fails to connect, practically speaking, with Bartleby. When the scrivener dies, the lawyer's desires seem to be at a temporary end. But the story does not end with Bartleby's death, and neither does the lawyer's progress. Haunted by Bartleby, the narrator keeps looking for explanations, and this search for meaning becomes yet another object. At the same time, we can imagine that the lawyer's newfound compassion sends him forward on new pursuits; in his parting words, he shifts from "Bartleby" to "humanity," possibly signifying a broadening, rather than a diminishment, of his charitable intentions. Moreover, Bartleby's death may serve as an worthwhile example for the lawyer, reminding him to keep *wanting*, rather than taking things too easily in his snug office.

On a similar note, William B. Dillingham suggests that in "The Piazza" Marianna "shocks the narrator into a more healthy state of mind" (372) even as she troubles him. Marianna's extreme loneliness makes the narrator less critical of his own degree of happiness. It remains troubling, however, that unlike the lawyer, the "Piazza" narrator is quick to abandon his unhappy acquaintance. The sense of fraternity with mankind is decidedly less emphatic in "The Piazza." Once again considering the "Piazza" speaker as a later incarnation of the lawyer-narrator in "Bartleby," it becomes difficult to believe that, after Bartleby, he has adopted charity for good. Although the narrator now feels his bond with humanity, when he faces another "incurable disorder" in Marianna, he becomes thoroughly "baffled" and reverts to an isolated pursuit of happiness. Perhaps

this illustrates Hobbes's point: in Melville's stories, the progress of desire shifts between objects that can be pursued in isolation, and objects that depend on other people.

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