

Voices On: Melville's «Bartleby»

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A man of a deep and noble nature has seized me in this seclusion. His wild, witch voice rings through me...

«Hawthorne and His Mosses», *The Literary World*, August 17 and 24. 1850

In this way of thinking, the people in a fiction, like the people in a play, must dress as nobody exactly dresses, talk as nobody exactly talks...

Chapter XXXIII. *Thr Confidence-Man (1857)*

Of all Melville's short fiction —the pieces which with a single exception he published between 1853 and 1856 in *Putnam's Wonthly Wagazine* and *Harper's New Wonthly Wagazine* and five of which were issued as *Piazza Tules* (1856) together with the purposely written sketch «The Piazza» — none has been the object of keener explicatory attention than «Bartleby» (1853)¹. Per-

¹ The text of «Bartleby» cited throughout is that of Herman Melville, *Piazza Tules*, New York, Hendricks House, 1962, ed. Egbert S. Oliver —the most reliable text pending issue of the *Piazza* and other short fiction in the definitive *The Writings of Herman Melville* (The Northwestern-Newberry Edition) Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1968. *Piazza Tales* collects five of Melville's stories. The full roster of Melville's 1853-56 short fiction in sequence was published as follows: «Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street», *Purnam's Monrhly Magazine*, November-December, 1853; «Cock-A-Doodle-Do», or, The Crowing of the Noble Cock Beneventano», *Harper's New Monrhly Magazine*, December, 1853; «The Encantadas or Enchanted Isles», *Purnam's Monrhly Magazine*, March-May, 1854; «The Two Temples», 1854, unpublished until *The Works of Herman Melville*, London, Constable, 1922-24; «Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs», *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, June, 1854; «The Happy Failure: A Story of the River Hudson», *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, July, 1854; «The Lightning-Rod Man», *Purnam's Monrhly Magazine*, July, 1854; «The Fiddler» (A Sketch), *Har-*

haps in one sense this hardly surprises. It offers Melville at his most challenging, its story of an anorexic law-scrivener exiled in a Wall Street dornain of «rich rnen's bonds, and rnortgages, and title-deeds», one which from the outset cornpels and unsettles by its sheer difference. For among other things, it sets before us a mystery —who, what is Bartleby? What of his origins, his preferences-not to, his rernoval to The Tombs, his «pallor» and «emaciation» and eventual death «huddled at the base of the wall» with his «dim eyes» still open and gaze-like? What, too, of the final post-script «Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!»? Yet as much as we find ourselves seized by «Bartleby» as therne, we cannot escape the matching cornplexity behind Melville's *telling* of the tale. For «Bartleby» exemplifies the artfulness at work in all of Melville's best story-telling, his subtlety of rnanner in controlling how the tale is voiced and hence the interplay of its different main lines of meaning. It is with this dynarnic of «voice» that the present essay concerns itself ².

The major interpretive readings of this first of Melville's «Piazza» stories by now have become well enough known ³. And justly: they bear tribute to its

per's New Monthly Magazine, September, 1854; «The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids», *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, April, 1855; «The Bell-Tower», *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, August, 1855; «Benito Cereno», *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, October-November, 1855; «Jimmy Rose», *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, November, 1855; «I and My Chimney», *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, March, 1856; «The Gees», *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, March, 1856; «The Apple-Tree Table, or Original Spiritual Manifestations», *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, May, 1856. To this list of fifteen stories needs to be added: «The Town Ho's Story», *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, October, 1851. Melville also wrote in this period *Israel Potter*, first published in nine instalments in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, July, 1854-March 1855, and then in full-length novel form in March, 1855. Also unpublished until the Constable Edition were: «The Marquis of Grandvin»; «Three Jack Gentian Sketches»; «John Marr» and «Daniel Orme»; and *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1888-91).

2 In approaching «voice» in the manner I do in this essay I want to acknowledge the following as useful pointers and analyses: Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1961; Guy Rosalato, «The Voice and the Literary Myth», in Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (eds.), *Structuralist Controversy*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1972, pp. 201-14; Daniel R. Swartz, «Speaking of Paul Morel: Voice, Unity, and Meaning», *Studies in the Novel*, 8, Fall 1976, pp. 255-77; Stephen R. Ross, «'Voice' in Narrative Texts: The Example of *As I Lay Dying*», *PMLA*, 94, 1979, pp. 300-10; Mark Kinkead-Weekes, «The Voicing of Fictions», in Ian Gregor, (ed.), *Reading the Victorian Novel: Detail Into Form*, London, Vision Press, 1980, pp. 168-90. My own concern with «voice» in Melville I have set out in a number of articles on his fiction and poetry: «*Moby-Dick*: The Tale and the Telling», in *New Perspectives On Melville*, ed., Faith Pullin, Edinburgh University Press, 1978, pp. 86-127; «*Moby-Dick* as Anatomy», in *Herman Melville: Reassessments*, ed. A. Robert Lee, London, Vision Press, 1984, pp. 68-89; «Voices Off, On. And Without: Ventriloquy in *The Confidence-Man*», in *Herman Melville: Reassessments* (op. cit.), pp. 157-75; «Eminently adapted for unpopularity? Melville's Poetry», in *Nineteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. A. Robert Lee, London, Vision Press, 1985, pp. 118-45; and «Voices Off and On: Melville's *Piazza* and other stories», in *The Nineteenth-Century American Short Story*, ed. A. Robert Lee, London, Vision Press, 1985, pp. 76-102. I also owe thanks to Professor John G. Blair, of the University of Geneva, for the benefits of discussion and comment.

3 Exegesis of the stories has been prolific. For overall accounts, see Richard Harter Fogle, *Melville's Shorter Tales*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1960; Kingsley Widmer, *The Ways of*

seriousness and weight, the genuine consequentiality of its vision. As recurrent a reading as any of the story posits Bartleby as the surrogate expression of Melville himself, that is Melville as also the rebuked scrivener, who equally had refused to «check his copy», especially in work like *Mardi* (1849), *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852). In these, as elsewhere, he had brought bitter castigation upon himself, the one-time South Seas diarist of *Typee* (1846) supposedly now given to Gothic and metaphysical extravagance and wholly out of touch with what one of his own letters ruefully terms «cakes and ale» reality⁴. Why had Melville not stuck to the «unvarnished truth» as he disingenuously called matters in *Typee*, narrative whose «copy» seemed uncomplicated and infinitely «checkable»?⁵.

Or «Bartleby» offers a «parable of walls», *la condition humaine* as that of self-loss, or absurdity and incarceration, later to be again anatomized in modernist classics like Kafka's *Der Prozess* and Camus's *La Peste*⁶. Other readings look more to «Bartleby» as a quasi-religious fable, Bartleby as the spurned Christ or Buddha, his eventual muteness that of a God-incarnation impossibly at odds with and forced into withdrawal from the present world. Less cosmically, it has been argued that «Bartleby» offers a classic portrait of personality disorder, catatonia perhaps, or schizophrenia, in which lawyer and clerk constitute divided facets of a single temperament, a story not dissimilar in kind to Edgar Allan Poe's «William Wilson» or Henry James's «The Jolly Corner». Or, and also less cosmically, «Bartleby» is interpreted as telling a Wall Street story almost to the letter, the epicentre of nineteenth century business America seen as murderous to the human creative spirit. Commodity fetishism, bonds, deeds, indeed the whole capitalist apparatus by this account consume and ultimately destroy vitality, leaving only a kind of anti-life or deadness. All these interpretations, and others, have their place.

Nihilism: Hernan Melville's Short Novels, Los Angeles. The California State Colleges, 1970; R. Bruce Bickley, *The Method of Melville's Short Fiction*, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1975; Marvin Fisher, *Going Under: Melville's Short Fiction and the American 1850s*, Louisiana State University Press, 1977; and William B. Dillingham, *Melville's Short Fiction 1853-1856*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1977.

4 *The Letters of Hernan Melville*, eds. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1960, Melville to Richard Bentley, 5 June, 1849. He speaks of his (then) forthcoming *Redburn* as follows: «I have now in preparation a thing of a widely different cast from «Mardi»: a plain, straightforward, amusing narrative of personal experience — the son of a gentleman on his first voyage to sea as a sailor — no metaphysics, no conic-sections, nothing but cakes and ale».

5 Reviewing J. Ross Browne, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise* for the *Literary World*, March 6th 1847, Melville writes as follows: «It is a book of unvarnished facts: and with some allowance for the general application of an individual example unquestionably represents a faithful picture of the life led by twenty thousand seamen employed in the seven hundred whaling vessels which now pursue their game under the American flag». In *Typee*, similarly, he speaks of telling the «unvarnished truth» about his Polynesian adventures.

6 See, especially, Leo Marx, «Melville's Parable of Walls», *Sewanee Review*, LXI, 1953, pp. 602-27.

They take up motifs and implications fully «there» in the story and without serious mutual contradiction.

My emphasis, however, as indicated earlier, falls somewhat differently, less on thematic forms of meaning than on the story's manner —its resonance as a «voice» overall. This of necessity refers principally to the lawyer as first-person narrator, his account a shifting register of authority, seeming humility, doubt, bafflement, anger, wonder and regret. But it also refers us to each of the story's other component voices, in turn those of the clerks Turkey and Nippers and the office boy Ginger Nut, then of Bartleby himself, as well as of the subsequent tenant, the landlord, and lastly, the tumkeys and grub-man at the Tombs. All of these voices we hear as recalled by the lawyer, to be put alongside his own and to be heard overall each in terms of the other. Thus the ultimate «voice» of the story lies behind (and beyond) that of its ostensible narrator and his supporting cast; it lies, in other words, in the «Bartleby» conceived and directed by Melville himself, the story which his Wall Street lawyer can only incompletely grasp.

In his great centrepiece, *Moby-Dick*, Melville begins his story proper with the words «Call me Ishmael». «Bartleby» opens its account with no lesser an act of voice, the lawyer (at least as Melville has him speak) at pains to position himself with greatest conscious care as story-teller. He offers himself as the privileged narrator, a voice full of apparent confidence and credentials and with a wholly unprecedented story to tell. «A rather elderly man» (and hence long on experience of the world?), he could, he assures us, have told «divers histories». But he opts to «waive» such in favour of «a few passages in the life of Bartleby», a scrivener «the strangest I ever saw, or heard of». He speaks of his own «astonished eyes» in the matter of Bartleby, an encounter wholly out of line with his «last thirty years» and which by its «singularity» invites the most careful scrutiny both of Bartleby and of his chronicler. For the play of reference cuts two ways at once, towards the portrait of the clerk and also of the lawyer-narrator. We are so alerted at the very beginning when the lawyer puts before the reader the following self-estimation:

Ere introducing the scrivener, as he first appeared to me, it is fit I make some mention of myself. my *employés*, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings; because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented. Imprimis: I am 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 address a jury, or in any way draw down public applause; but, in the cool tranquility of a snug

retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds, and mortgages. and title-deeds. All who know me, consider me an eminently *safe* man. The late John Jacob Astor. a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next. method. I do not speak it in vanity. but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor: a name which, I admit, I love to repeat; for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion. I will add that I was not insensible to the late John Jacob Astor's good opinion.

How, in fact, are we to regard this voice? Is it what ostensibly it purports to be, self-effacing, discreet, that of a deservedly trusted, behind-the-scenes financial and legal adviser, to be accepted on its own terms as truly «unambitious» and «eminently *safe*»? Or is it to the contrary, smug, unctuous, a voice full of self-serving deference, happy to invoke (three times) the name of John Jacob Astor («a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm») as a standard to be emulated and respected? Is it, too, a voice speaking as of now, the encounter with Bartleby having come and gone and without significant disturbance of the lawyer's «safeness», that is of his sense of himself as the appropriating standard of value? Or to the contrary is it a voice riding for a fall, a check to its own certainty? Indeed, is it a voice which reflects that fall, ironic at its own expense? And, relatedly, is not the lawyer speaking as if to say «so I was» and in a voice which re-enacts its one-time ingenuousness in order to portray Bartleby literally «as he first appeared to me»?

Whichever of these possibilities seems likeliest, we cannot avoid hearing in the lawyer's voice the would-be assumption of consensus, the self-appointed tone of the centre. He speaks as the intimate of business's rules and rhetoric, «Wall Street» as a sanctioned and «bonded» right order, be it of work, conduct, society at large, or the very rhythm of the day, week, sabbath. or year. His only apparent paining backward glance has to do with the abolition of his own sinecure, that of Master of Chancery in the State of New York. In so situating the lawyer at the furthest temperamental remove from the «unreasonable» Bartleby, Melville lays the ground for a tantalizing opposition. One voice, the lawyer's, belongs wholly to and in the world — a practitioner of its idioms, its rituals, its very cosmology. The other increasingly withdraws from that world, expressing only negative preferences and edging towards silence and voicelessness. The lawyer's voice for all his credentials of the right word at the right time comes over as lavish in verbal resources, a man indeed of «divers histories» who «loves to repeat» Astor's millionaire name like some masonic incantation. His throughout is the accent of the assured insider, the initiate. Bartleby, by contrast, personifies outsidersness, withdrawal from the world. His utterances become minimal («I would prefer not to»), barely audi-

ble and eventually nonexistent and as silent as the wall next to which he finally expires.

The lawyer's office, too, square, shafted, and monotonously bricked, makes the perfect sound-chamber for the drama which follows. It hitherto has allowed no space for new sounds, new turns of voice, anything which could dissent from the established idiom and rhythm of the lawyer's trade. Its two other adult denizens, the morning and afternoon copyists Turkey and Nippers, indeed make an odd arithmetical whole, both half-men and both the matching opposite of the other. Both, too, could easily have come from some Dickens fantasy, complementary Victorian humours figures. Yet quirky as they both appear—the morning Turkey who copies well until mid-day when he becomes «strange» and «inflamed» and «blots» his writing, and the afternoon Nippers whose pre-mid-day copying reflects his «irritable, brandy-like disposition» but who settles to acceptable copying once past noon—they also set up paired, or double voices. In this, however tacitly, they anticipate the equally doubled and complementary voices of the lawyer and *Bartleby*. Ginger Nut, similarly, belongs in this humours gallery, a 12-year old, dollar-a-week «cakes and apple purveyor for Turkey and Nippers». For like his office elders, he has become totally and parodically the sum of his function. Or as the story puts matters: «to this quick-witted youth, the whole noble science of the law was contained in a nut-shell». All three office figures operate, and speak, only to a pattern, Turkey and Nippers in alternating currents, Ginger Nut in fulfilment of what is expected by his employer and the two clerks. The office thus functions as a perfect business and legal machine, a rectilinear quartet of voices all speaking to a required Wall Street script.

It is into this regulated, Benthamite office-universe that *Bartleby* enters, on first view to the lawyer «motionless», «pallidly neat», «pitiably respectable» and «incurably forlorn!». He writes «silently, palely, mechanically», the utter amanuensis and worker-copyist, as robotic as the women in the paper factory of Melville's story «*The Tartarus of Maids*». It is on the third day, and with a possible messianic echo, that he utters his initial «I would prefer not to», a nay-saying couched mock-politely in the conditional form —«would prefer not to», for «will not». A «screened» copyist, situated «at the threshold» in the office's geometric lay-out, no longer can he agree to copy «by sun-light and by candle-light», the impassive day and night recorder of those «bonds» and «deeds» by which the world imagines itself held together. By his run of preferences «not to» he begins a withdrawal from all the world's conventions and idioms both spoken and written. The lawyer's response involves a most pointed reference to Cicero as master orator:

had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors.

Is it too fanciful to imagine the lawyer as himself an ironic «plaster-of-paris» Cicero, his «worldly» oratory to be seen as quite as «pale» as Bartleby's bleak negations? Furthermore, each of Bartleby's «I would prefer not to» the lawyer thinks «flutelike» as though Bartleby indeed were some Orphic poet-stranger, a singer not given to the world's oratorios and descants.

At the employer's discomforture, and then anger, Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut are quick to fall into line. Turkey thinks his employer simply «right» in his reaction. Nippers thinks violence the appropriate course of action (both he and Turkey are in their respective murning modes). And Ginger Nut takes the sense of the occasion and blithely asserts that Bartleby comes over as «a little lunny», a denigration however unintended by its speaker which carries cosmic implications. So re-enforced by his clerks the lawyer also embarks on a process of decoding Bartleby's strange acts of voice:

it was generally understood that he would «prefer not to» — in other words, that he would refuse point-blank.

Hitherto ordinary words take on new status, an unordinary and ever more disturbing resonance. The lawyer, and the reader through him, has to juggle with a revolving cluster of terms. *would*, *will*, *not*, *rather*, and like a great semantic beacon, *prefer*. His mind becomes a veritable theatre of debate — Bartleby's «industry» and «utility» as against his «passive resistance», «strange willfulness», «eccentricity» and «mulish vagary». He even ponders the copyist's immunity to the stimulation of ginger-nuts, his unarousable appetite for forms of worldly stimulus and nutrition. Bartleby, in other words, speaks in a quite other voice, a voice less on the side of words than on the side of silence.

The lawyer's self-debate spirals even more inwards with his Sunday visit to the office. He dwells upon Bartleby as some ghostly death-in-life figure, perhaps on the one hand his own *alter ego*, perhaps on the other a «cadaverous», pale apparition out to warn him against the deadening texture of his Wall Street existence:

Think of it. Of a Sunday, Wall Street is deserted as Petra; and every night of every week it is an emptiness... And here Bartleby makes his home: sole spectator of a solitude which he has seen all populous — a sort of innocent and transformed Marius brooding among the ruins of Carthage!

For the first time in my life a feeling of »ver-powering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not displeasing sadness. The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam. I remembered the bright silks and sparkling faces I had seen that day, in gala trim, swan-like sailing down the

Mississippi of Broadway; and I contrasted them with the pallid copyist. and thought to myself, Ah, happiness courts the light, so we deem the world is gay: but misery hides aloof, so we deem that misery there is none. These sad fancyings —chimeras, doubtless, of a sick and silly brain— led on to other and more special thoughts, concerning the eccentricities of Bartleby. Presentiments of strange discoveries hovered about me. The scrivener's pale form appeared to me laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding sheet.

Bartleby, on this evidence, truly has become the occasion of 'sad fancyings', «chimeras», «more and more special thoughts~and «presentiments of strange discoveries». For all that the lawyer deludes himself that he can be «bonded» and «fraternal» with his copyist, he in fact is looking at the embodiment of an otherness, a counter or alternative image of self which is profoundly unnerving. «Presentiments» are one thing, however; they are not the «discoveries» themselves. In conjuring up «misery» as against «gaity», «gloom» as against «happiness» he has been forced into a register quite different from his accustomed habits and inflections. The lawyer has begun to speak and act less sure of his axis than at any time previously. more for the first time in the voice of circumference rather than of centre. And it is a voice which also «for the first time in my life» must reflect «over-powering stinging melancholy».

He finds himself, further, recalling Bartleby's «quiet mysteries», his «long-continued motionlessness» and «dead-wall reveries», all the oposite of his own regulated business. He confesses, too, to a transformation of his «pure melancholy and sincerest pity» into «repulsion», sensing that any «alms» he might supply to Bartleby's body merely emphasize the «unreachability» of the copyist's soul. The lawyer, thereby, speaks slightly more understandingly but still inadequately of Bartleby. an inadequacy nonetheless which deepens and extends *our* perception of the «forlorn» clerk. We cannot but sense that each repetition of Bartleby's «I would prefer not to» in fact acts to invade, and place, the hitherto self-owning voices of the lawyer and of his other clerks so making them proportionately less the definers than the defined. The more, in other words, that the lawyer speaks of Bartleby's undeviating presence («*he was always there*»), or of his «perverseness» and «unreasonableness», the more he gives evidence of his own diminution as an authoritative voice. His previous «roaring» at Bartleby, for instance, has done no more than elicit the ritual «I would prefer not to».

The Sunday visit, thus, and his probings into Bartleby's spare belongings, if anything deepen rather than explain the copyist's «mysteries». He remains, for all that the lawyer calls upon him unawares, a figure just as before of «austere» reserve and «forlornness», who simply «looks out... upon the dead brick wall», who never dines, never takes walks, never offers evidence of kin or family, and who never complains of possible ill-health or inward affliction.

The lawyer, however, makes a more «positive» observation that Bartleby «never spoke but to answer», the copyist as always the addressee, the recipient of others' questions and requests.

It is precisely these typical questions that the lawyer does put to Bartleby «the next morning», queries «touching his history, etc.». But he meets yet further deflections, a «wall» of negative voicing which revealingly leaves him «mortified». Even so, and true to his *soi-disant* placatory nature, he proposes to Bartleby that «in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable». The answer he receives sounds even more distant and absolute: «At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable». Before this answering non-answer the lawyer—a man on his own avowed standard of negotiations, bargains, deals spoken for and sealed—simply has nothing to grasp. His has become a rhetoric merely of gesture, frustration.

So bereft, he seeks Nippers's opinion only to arouse a typical morning explosion of ill-will:

«*Prefer* not, eh?» gritted Nippers— «I'd *prefer* him, if I were you, sir»... «I'd *prefer* him; I'd give him preferences, the stubborn mule! What is it, sir, pray, that he *prefers* not to do now?»

The lawyer's resigned response is to «prefer» that Nippers «withdraw for the present». Turkey, too, gives in turn his respective «morning» view, namely that if Bartleby «would but prefer to take a quart of good ale every day» it would «do much» to bring to his senses. This echoing re-iteration of «prefer» (like «confidence» in *The Confidence-Man*) causes the lawyer to say of it: «That's the word... that's it». And the conclusion he draws (having already witnessed that «I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word «prefer» upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions») smacks even more of someone losing direction of his own voice:

I thought to myself, surely I must get rid of this demented man, who already has in some degree turned the tongues, if not the heads of myself and clerks.

Yet however much the occasion of a loss of verbal self-control in others, Bartleby himself continues to seem «absolutely alone in the universe», «a bit of a wreck in the mid Atlantic». His stillness, like his silences and minimal responses, have oddly penetrated all of the lawyer's rhetorical armory and defences as well as the alternating morning voices of his two principal clerks. It is, too, at this point that Bartleby announces he «will do no more writing», adding when asked his reason the following: «Do you not see for yourself?». This is one of the few times Bartleby actually deviates from his merely responsive forms of utterance—and the effect ironically is to throw the burden of taking the initiative even more upon the lawyer.

He for his part attempts as a consequence a new kind of approach, that of the giver of a notice to quit. He offers Bartleby thirty-two dollars, makes a polite exit, and promises his services as a referee. For a moment he fancies himself exquisitely relieved, even developing a self-congratulatory interior monologue on his «masterly management», his «sagacious» procedure. Nevertheless, he walks the town «arguing the probabilities pro and con» as to whether Bartleby will in fact vacate the office: then mistakenly thinks the voices of «an excited group of people» discussing an election a reference to Bartleby; and finally imagines the whole of Broadway sharing «his excitement» and «debating the same question with me» — a seeming concourse of voices as it were, as fixated as himself upon Bartleby's negative utterances.

He returns to find Bartleby still in the office, still a «wall» of preferring-not-to, still a figure who can hardly be «credited», still the object of rumour and «a whisper of wonder». His own voicing again turns round on itself: «Since he will not quit me, I must quit him». This, after he has sought out a yet further matching pair of voices — Jonathan Edwards, the great 18th Century New England and Calvinist luminary, on a Will», and Joseph Priestly, the distinctly unCalvinist English philosopher-rationalist, on «Necessity». From them he presumably takes ambiguous comfort from the notion that the Will is always subject to one or another overarching Necessity. In taking action to vacate, the lawyer then assumes still another voice, that of farewell:

«Good-by, Bartleby; I am going —good-by, and God some way bless you...».

But within days another voice surfaces to confront him, that of his successor as a Wall Street tenant. He, as if one more in a serial chain of lawyers, asks: «In mercy's name who is he?». He, in his turn, is then followed by the landlord, this time a voice of near-hysteria, concerned for his investment:

«These gentlemen, my tenants, cannot stand it any longer: Mr. B...» pointing to the lawyer, «has tamed him out of his room, and he now persists in haunting the building generally, sitting upon the banisters of the stairs by day, and sleeping in the entry by night. Everybody is concerned; clients are leaving the offices: some fears are entertained of a mob; something you must do, and that without delay».

Unwittingly, the landlord so mythifies Bartleby still further as a figure whose «stationary» form and unspeaking sentinelship bespeaks voicelessness as the profoundest eloquence, the indictment of the unsaid.

As always the lawyer tries yet another tack. He suggests Bartleby work in (of all things) «a dry-goods store», or as a bar-tender (this of a man who

barely eats or drinks), or as a travelling bill-collector. To which, from a further distance than at any time previously, Bartleby replies:

«No, I would prefer to be doing something else»

His negations and immobility provoke one last «flight» in the lawyer. He dashes «up Wall Street towards Broadway», then to «the upper part of the town», and eventually into neighbouring Jersey City, Hoboken, Manhattanville and Astoria. Yet Bartleby's voice, and image, haunt him everywhere. No longer can he fancy himself the figure who first offered himself as «eminently safe» and self-approvingly «prudent» and «methodical» and unprone to «dangerous indignation». Quite the reverse: he has become a fugitive before Bartleby's utterances, a haunted Ancient Mariner unable to shake off each negative preference and quasi-formal refusal to copy. Bartleby's last words to him in his Wall Street domain run as follows:

«No: at present I would prefer not to make any change at all».

Nor, in truth does he change, even though «removed to the Tombs» as a vagrant. He will remain, through to his death, an unchanging and unchangeable voice, the lawyer's accusing fellow-colloquist and secret-sharer even from beyond the grave.

Like a disciple summoned, the lawyer duly and finally makes his own way to the Tombs. In so doing he follows in the path of his «poor scrivener» who just previously has «silently acquiesced» in his formal imprisonment. A company of «compassionate and curious bystanders» have formed into a «silent procession», causing the lawyer to think of Bartleby himself as the very touchstone of «silence» passing through «all the noise, and heat, and joy of the roaring thoroughfares at noon». Bartleby might indeed on this reckoning be a mute Christ moving resignedly to his own crucifixion. The lawyer's by now almost exhausted resolve to make some last saving spoken contact with his copyist (an increasingly parodic term since Bartleby will «copy» nothing and no-one) results in a quite devastating exchange:

«Bartleby!»

«I know you», he said, without looking round —«and I want nothing to say to you».

«It was not I that brought you here, Bartleby», said I, keenly pained at his implied suspicion. «And to you, this should not be so vile a place. Nothing reproachful attached to you by being here. And see, it is not so sad a place as one might think. Look, there is the sky, and here is the grass».

«I know where I am», he replied, but would say nothing more, and so I left him.

This closing cross-play of voices virtually encapsulates the story at large. Firstly the calling out of Bartleby's name acts as the lawyer's last desperate attempt to make amends, to understand and harmonize. It produces only Bartleby's indicting «I know you... and I want nothing to say to you». The lawyer's voice of intended concern, or guilt, or simple bafflement, evidently for Bartleby amounts to nothing, fatuous verbal gesturing. He has moved on from all language, all copying, all «worldly» manner of communication. With averted gaze, he is turned «towards a high wall» responding to the lawyer with a yet further damning phrase: «I know where I am». At an immediate level the reference directs us to how he has come to be placed in the Tombs, exacerbating still further the lawyer's guilt. Yet beyond that lie more tacit and buried implications. Notions of knowing and being in the context of the story carry inescapably existential, even cosmic, resonance. Bartleby's whispered phrases «speak» as emerging from a voice in process of withdrawal from all of the world's competing codes and «copy». The «reality» of the lawyer, of Wall Street behind him, and of the order of things behind Wall Street, no longer includes him. His is the gaze from afar, that of sheer, alienated otherness.

Accordingly, it comes as a shock to be pulled back into that self-same «reality» by the grub-man with his voice of coarse and earthly concerns. «Does he want to starve?» he asks of the lawyer. He proffers the most elementary service, dinners to be purchased for the better-off prisoners. When Bartleby typically answers «I would prefer not to dine today», the grub-man's response takes on an almost comic hue. He thinks the copyist «odd», «deranged», and most likely, «a gentleman forger». But as so often with the voices in the story, his, too, carries other meanings. The notion of Bartleby as indeed «starved», not to mention a «forger», could hardly be apter. He can take no nutrition, actual or spiritual, from the Wall Street order about him. Then, for him to write, or copy, the world's fare amounts to a «forgery» which he has «preferred not» to agree to or perpetuate. We are thus shown, again, not so much what Bartleby is, or necessarily signifies, but what he *is not*. He can no longer any more «dine» than he can «copy», or become any of the professions so solicitously (and guiltily) put to him by the lawyer. He expresses, as it were, nothing less than being itself, unwilling (or preferring not) to assume any shape or occupation hitherto offered him. That he should then be compared by the grub-man with Monroe Edwards, an actual forger-swindler, who allegedly «died of consumption at Sing-Sing» adds yet further poignancy. Bartleby has not swindled; rather he himself has been swindled, or been «consumed», by the very world he has been asked to join and then copy. He will no longer add to the world's forgery, its endless proliferation of false «facts», «needs», «beliefs» and «words». Over speech he opts for non-speech, and finally silence.

The lawyer returns a last time, only to hear one of the turnkeys refer to Bartleby as «the silent man». What he encounters is a Bartleby regressed to

the very point of human birth. curled foetally by the prison's «Egyptian» walls of «amazing thickness», emblematic instances of the world's indecipherably hieroglyphic evasions and blocks. Yet though dead, all human speech cancelled. Bartleby's «dim» eyes remain open and gaze-like. The grub-man asks «Won't he dine today. either?», to which the lawyer bemusedly replies «Lives without dining». He then closes Bartleby's eyes for ever, puts out his human light as it were. His «sleep» «with kings and counselors» points (in the manner of the last sentence of *The Confidence-Man*) to some other possible form of «life» — a «life» which exists only as «death» in the present world. Bartleby's legacy thus becomes one of monumental eloquence, the unsaid as profoundest saying.

Only the lawyer's requiem remains, but that, too, an act of voice as provocative as any in the story. Given the momentous nature of Bartleby's life and death, a man who has «preferred not» (because he cannot?) establish his own being among a «Wall Street» and «Tombs» humankind and who as a consequence has simply withdrawn into silence and non-being, the lawyer's final words take on the most ironic understatedness. He speaks to the reader as now a co-partner in the story who, «if this little narrative has sufficiently interested him», might care for one further «little item of rumor». He discloses that Bartleby has, reportedly, «been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington». He then gives in to a run of bitter, searing reflections: «Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?». He conjures up in imagination «the pale clerk» obliged to take custody of undelivered trinkets and letters and expressions of human feeling:

Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them to the flames? For by the cart-load they are annually burned. Sometimes from out of the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring the finger it was meant for. perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity — he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death.

Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!

It would not be inappropriate to think Bartleby the very embodiment of Dead Letter humanity, one who initially on his «errand of life» has met only with «calamity», unrecognition. unrequitedness. Has not the lawyer in fact chanp :d from his one-time «safeness» and «snugness» into a voice of deepest,

⁷ The Tombs was, in literal fact, built with «Egyptian» motifs and designs as embellishment to its construction.

inescapable sympathy? Or is he, still, custodial and «distant» as when Bartleby worked in his office? My own inclination is towards the former: this concluding voice speaks in chastened tones, an appalled, transformed voice of witness. And the more so as at every turn he signals the great gulf in his own understanding of Bartleby. His every effort has virtually failed, or fallen short, leaving him to grope for a right set of words or formula by which to understand his copyist.

Whatever Bartleby's «origins», or clerkly life, or going-hence, Melville provides for him the perfect chronicler, one whose incompleteness of comprehension throws the burden equally and if not more upon the reader. On the one hand Bartleby takes his place alongside all the other silent (or silenced) figures in Melville's fiction —the defeated Pierre Glendinning in *Pierre* (who also dies a would-be writer in the Tombs), the «Chola Widow» Hunilla in «The Encantadas», the forlorn women paper-workers in «The Tartarus of Maids», the beheaded black slave insurrectionist Babo in «Benito Cereno», the flaxen Mute in *The Confidence-Man*, and finally, his doomed, stuttering innocent, Billy Budd, in *Billy Budd, Sailor*⁸. And on the other hand, Bartleby finds, like his compeers, a right kind of narrator, one either unable or reticent to tell all, to discover the definitive account.

If we insist on any single interpretation of Bartleby himself, or of his «story» as told by the lawyer, accordingly, we run the risk of closing down his essential mystery, his voice of refusal and negation. He may indeed be the lawyer's own *alter ego*. Or he may be his own creature and wholly *sui generis*. Or he may personify a lost, alienated and absurd general humanity. Or, too, he may express some Christly godhead, unwanted and again crucified by an unrecognizing and faithless world. In all of these, and through the finely poised ambiguity and incompleteness of the lawyer's narration, Melville points to the sheer otherness of self, its essential strangeness. In allowing us to hear the voice of that self, as told through the lawyer and in orchestration with the story's still other voices, Melville builds his story into an extraordinary «voice» overall —the masterpiece that is «Bartleby».

8 Another figure who has experienced The Tombs is the one-legged soldier in *The Confidence-Man*, but he —unlike the others— has used his imprisonment (and affliction) as a means of getting back at the world. He deploys his own imposture to get back at the world's «imposture».