

“Madness as a Response to Modernity in Literature: An Author’s Tool for Cultural Critique”

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Herman Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener” marks the beginning of a literary lineage responding to the consumeristic and work-obsessed climate of modern life in the American city. Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts* continues this tradition with its commentary on a fully modern, depression-era New York City. Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* takes up the resulting postmodern desert of unsubstantiated simulacra and its utterly vacuous inhabitants. Though these pieces of literature differ significantly in style and form, they engage in virtually identical methodology to investigate the pressures and tribulations of the modern and postmodern urban setting. All three of these works use the lense of mental illness of an individual male in the densely urban environment of New York City to examine and critique the general cultural paradigm of the author’s moment. The “madness” of all three titular characters constitutes their response to modernity’s intense industrialization, urbanization, and commercialization of everyday life. Viewed as a response to this fundamental shift in the human experience, the authors’ seemingly extreme characterizations most accurately represent universal cultural critiques rather than hyperbolic accounts of mental illness for the sake of grotesque entertainment.

Bartleby exists in a world where work occupies a newly independent and isolated sphere of everyday life. The bulk of the story takes place at the narrator’s Wall Street law office. Melville crafted one of the more jarringly modern aspects of the story by denying his characters any identity outside of the context of their working environment. When describing his

employees, the narrator comments, “First, Turkey; second, Nippers; third, Ginger Nut. These may not seem names... In truth they were nicknames, mutually conferred upon each other by my three clerks” (Norton 1484). By denying each other their given names and addressing their co-workers through names sensible solely within the workplace, the characters dehumanize each other and assert the totality of work’s authority over other spheres of life. *Bartleby* contrasts with this practice since Melville never mentions the origin or authenticity of Bartleby’s name. In one sense, Bartleby’s not taking on a new name upon entering the law office marks an act of rebellion against the narrator and the standardized, mechanized paradigm he represents. A more pessimistic reading might conclude that the lack of elucidation on Bartleby’s name signifies not the brave defiance on the part of the scrivener but instead an acknowledgment of the ultimate unimportance of his individual being; Bartleby’s name simply does not matter because the value of his personhood matters only in direct proportion to his ability to function as a “cog” within the modern “machine.” This latter interpretation makes more sense than the former in light of Bartleby’s subsequent degeneration.

Miss Lonelyhearts also faces disillusioning and dehumanizing practices in his place of employment. West’s naming of the character presents the most obvious of these practices. The titular character, his interlocutors, and West’s omniscient narration neither reveal Miss Lonelyhearts’ “real” name nor give any indication that the lack of such information disturbs them. This furthers the theme of loss of identity found in mid-19th century *Bartleby*. Shrike’s constant verbal prodding and bullying also contributes to Miss Lonelyhearts’ sense of despair and disillusionment in the workplace. West pairs these maddening facets of the work experience with the idea that work has become indelibly tethered to other, formerly separate, spheres of life

within a modern paradigm. By the era of the Great Depression, work not only constitutes a wholly different sphere of life from non-work but also infiltrates these other spheres so as to dominate them. West speaks to this constant infiltration of work into the sphere of nonwork as Miss Lonelyhearts passes a park on his walk home thinking, “What the little park needed, even more than he did, was a drink. Neither alcohol nor rain would do. Tomorrow, in his column, he would ask Broken-hearted, Sick-of-it-all, Desperate, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband and the rest of his correspondents to come here and water the soil with their tears” (5). Strange mixtures such as this where Miss Lonelyheart views the world through the lense of his column abound in the novel. West presents these instances as symptomatic clues signifying modernity’s causal status in Miss Lonelyheart’s malaise.

Patrick Bateman’s world presents a full realization of both the loss of individual identity and the sphere of work’s infiltration into every component of life introduced in “Bartleby the Scrivener.” Ellis pushes the motif of identity loss to its extreme by literally making all of the characters totally interchangeable with one another. Other characters mistake Bateman for someone else many times throughout the novel, and Bateman just continues the conversation normally as if this made total sense. An example of this occurs at Evelyn’s Christmas party where Peterson addresses Bateman, “Hey McCloy,” and Bateman responds without missing a beat, “Is this the British cast recording of *Les Miserables* or not?” (Ellis 182). Exchanges such as this add much humor to the novel, but they also speak to the more stark reality of the total lack of individualism or substantive identity amidst a postmodern landscape. With regard to the hyper prioritization of work, virtually every component of Bateman’s life constantly relates back to his job directly or indirectly through his high socioeconomic status. His position as one of

innumerable Vice Presidents at Pierce and Pierce often seems to serve as the sole validation for his existence outside of his binging on murderous and sexually explicit activity. Ellis evinces this tethering of socioeconomic status to value with Bateman's obsession over the Fisher account as the only thing outside of carnal desire that arouses any interest within the titular character.

Ironically, Ellis simultaneously presents "work" as unsubstantiated in the same manner as the other facets of life it has replaced. Bateman's time in the office consists entirely of his ordering Jean to make lunch or dinner dates for him, watching television, and flipping through irrelevant magazines like *Sports Illustrated*. Even his attempt to leisurely read a tangentially relevant financial publication fails. He explains, "I pick up this morning's *Wall Street Journal* and scan the front page -- all of it one ink-stained senseless typeset blur" (Ellis 64). Once again, this moment is both humorous and speaks to Ellis' nuanced message about the totality of work's control over every facet of life. Bateman must *appear* to wear the suits, read the magazines, and live the life of which he's expected, but whether these appearances actually represent substance matters not at all.

"Bartleby the Scrivener" also set the precedent for critiquing the confining and disorienting nature of modern urban space. The narrator describes his law office, "At one end [my chambers] looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious sky-light shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom. This view might have been rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call 'life'" (Norton 1484). The story's subheading, "A Story of Wall-Street," suggests that Melville meant to make a broad metaphorical statement about urban space. In the literal sense, the narrator's confining himself to his law office has replaced his view of life with a wall. In a metaphorical sense, urbanization and

modern city life built literal and figurative “walls” around what was before considered “life.”

Melville also makes a point of the narrator’s attempt to glamorize the wall outside his window as something worth looking at. The narrator states, “[M]y 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” (Norton 1484). This passage demonstrates the narrator’s intention to portray his view of a big black wall as somehow inherently beautiful. In contrast, Bartleby refuses to acknowledge any beauty within his bleak urban environment. The narrator ironically interprets Bartleby’s acknowledgement of his oppressive surroundings as mental illness. The lawyer fails to see Bartleby’s behavior as the logical response to modernity that Melville seems to suggest. The narrator expresses this irony rather succinctly when he comments, “Meanwhile Bartleby sat in his hermitage, oblivious to every thing but his own peculiar business there” (Norton 1491).

The New York City of *Miss Lonelyhearts* builds upon the oppressiveness of urban space found in Melville’s work. West describes Miss Lonelyheart’s apartment, “He lived by himself in a room that was as full of shadows as an old steel engraving. It held a bed, a table and two chairs. The walls were bare except for an ivory Christ that hung opposite the foot of the bed” (West 8). Compared to Melville’s narrator’s description, the tone here openly admits to the scene’s sense of malaise. The reader assumes that windows have no place in Miss Lonelyheart’s room, and even if they did, they would inevitably look out upon a wall. West’s use of space effectively evokes a sense of total hopelessness. Even the single object of hope or individual expression in the room, the ivory Christ, leads to disappointment. Miss Lonelyhearts “removed the figure from the cross to which it had been fastened and had nailed it to the wall with large spikes. But the

desired effect had not been obtained. Instead of writing, the Christ remained calmly decorative” (West 8). West makes it clear that the negative emotions associated with space are markedly urban through the section where Miss Lonelyhearts visits the country. Upon reaching a pastoral setting, Miss Lonelyhearts “had to admit, even to himself, that the pale new leaves, shaped and colored like candle flames, were beautiful and that the air smelt clean and alive” (West 36). This blatant contrast between Miss Lonelyheart’s view of urban and nonurban space elucidates beyond doubt West’s commentary on the urban space of the modern city as a source of depression and disillusionment.

In a similar fashion to the characteristics previously described, *American Psycho* takes up the disorienting, confining, and depressing nature of space in New York City and magnifies it exponentially to match the full realization of postmodernity. Ellis establishes this extreme sense of oppressive space from the opening passage, “ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE is scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank near the corner of Eleventh and First... a bus pulls up, the advertisement for *Les Miserables* on its side” (Ellis 3). The constant stream of commercialized images evoked here never ceases for a moment throughout the whole book. While *Bartleby* recognized the oppressive nature of his urban environment and Miss Lonelyhearts could at least see the appeal in an agrarian alternative, Bateman’s entrapment in urban space and its proliferation of hollow images proves wholly encapsulating. At the end of his “vacation” to the Hamptons, he comments, “Everything failed to subdue me. Soon everything seemed dull: another sunrise, the lives of heroes, falling in love, war, the discoveries people made about each other, the only thing that didn’t bore me, obviously enough, was how much money Tim Price made” (282). By the end of the 20th century, The

“walls” of Bartleby’s Wall Street evolved with urban culture into boundaries not only physically impassable, but also mentally and socially inescapable. Ellis posits this sentiment well with the novel’s concluding remark, “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT” (Ellis 399).

Of the three components of modernity discussed here (industrialization, urbanization, and commercialization/consumerism), the last of this trio merits special mention for having relatively little presence in the early modernity of “Bartleby the Scrivener” and the most presence of the three in *American Psycho*. Melville’s story occurs in a moment predating the proliferation of consumer-based areas of activity such as department stores, but the tale does plant the seeds of modern consumerism with its emphasis on socioeconomic status. The scene where the lawyer uses his wealth as a tool to appease Bartleby speaks to this emphasis. Speaking to Bartleby, the lawyer says, “I owe you twelve dollars on account; here are thirty-two; the odd twenty are yours. -- Will you take it?” (Norton 1499). The lawyer walks away from this exchange praising himself for his “masterly management” of the situation, suggesting his certainty in money’s ability to reconcile any situation and make people act as he pleases. When Bartleby contests this notion by refusing to take the money, the lawyer appears shocked. Still though, the lawyer only understands their interchange in monetary terms, saying, “What earthly right have you to stay here? Do you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?” (Norton 1501). Bartleby never replies, signifying his understanding of the lawyer’s fundamental incapacity to think in terms not grounded in fiscal prudence.

Miss Lonelyhearts presents a modern culture where the lawyer’s fiscally-minded ethos has become the default mode of thinking and blatant consumerism now dominates the life of the

many New Yorkers, especially those in the higher socioeconomic strata. While mockingly listing means of escapism, Shrike speaks of a life of pleasure where one enjoys “Golf as well as booze, Philadelphia Jack O’ Brien and his chestweights as well as Spanish dancers... You fornicate under pictures by Matisse and Picasso... You decide to give a last party... the table is a coffin carved for you by Eric Gill” (West 34). Shrike speaks of the people, art pieces, and experiences listed here as commodified objects ready for consumption, but he notes that Miss Lonelyhearts lacks the money to obtain any of these things. This speaks to the way in which wealth and status become indelibly and conspicuously tethered in a consumer society. *Miss Lonelyhearts* also displays evidence of modern society’s dependence on consumerism in its association of people with objects. An example of this occurs in the proposal scene when Miss Lonelyhearts “[begs] the party dress [Betty] to marry him, saying all the things it expected to hear, all the things that went with strawberry sodas and farms in Connecticut” (West 56). West presents a world where consumerism, commercialization, and commodification function as a valid means of communication and understanding in every sphere of life.

In *American Psycho*, consumerism and commercialization represent the *only* means to understand and function within the world. Personally, Bateman and his peers never fully appreciate what another person has to say, but they always notice exactly what the person wears or where they have obtained reservations. Spatially, consumerism catalyzes the postmodern hypersaturated landscape of images understood only in the context of other images. The brands referenced in just the first three of six pages describing Bateman’s apartment include David Onica, MTV, Toshiba, NEC, Turchin, Steuben, Fortunoff, Wurlitzer, Baldwin, Gio Ponti, Sansui, Duntech Sovereign, Sony, Panasonic, Ettore Sottsass, Eric Marcus, Maud Sienna, Ralph

Lauren, Fari Isle, Enrico Hidolin, Washmobile, Hastings Tile, Plax, Rembrandt, Listerine, Probright, Interplak, Cepacol, Vidal Sassoon, and Gruene (Ellis 24-26). Clearly, Bateman sees literally everything around him through the lense of branding and commercialization. Ellis' stylistic choice to employ first-person narration gives the reader the insight that Bateman bases his decision-making purely upon unsubstantiated sign value instead of utility or any other practical purpose. Bateman utilizes this schema of evaluation with people as well as objects. He expresses this with his murders of homeless Al relatively early on in the novel. Bateman's murder of Paul Owen complicates this way of thinking, since Bateman sees Owen as belonging to his own socioeconomic class (and perhaps even an even higher one since he manages the much-coveted Fisher account). This might be reconciled with by the notion that Bateman makes this particular kill out of anger and envy. This would further support Bateman's obsession with socioeconomic success amid a densely consumeristic late-20th century landscape.

A final connection worth noting among the three works is that each "mentally ill" protagonist has a point where he delivers a lucid acknowledgement of his own situation. This occurs towards the end of "Bartleby the Scrivener" where Bartleby replies to the lawyer, "I know you... and I want nothing to do with you... I know where I am" (Norton 1507). This serves as a strong indication to the reader that Bartleby's supposedly deranged behavior came from a mind acutely aware of its setting and place. The comparable passage in *Miss Lonelyhearts* occurs when the titular character tells Betty, "Perhaps I can make you understand... A man is hired to give advice to readers of a newspaper. He... considers the job a joke... the joke begins to escape him... For the first time in his life, he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. This examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and not it's perpetrator" (West 32). Such

straightforward and clear language seems especially out of place amidst the generally metaphor-laden and disorienting style of the novel. *American Psycho*'s version of this comes late in the novel, where Bateman says, "[T]here is an idea of Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: *I simply am not there*" (Ellis 376-7).

These three quotations closely tether "Bartleby the Scrivener," *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and *American Psycho*. These works dissect the cultural moment in which they were written and deliver an honest and brutal explication of the results. Each uses a seemingly mentally-ill observer to personalize the narrative, but a reader has much to lose if he or she invests too much into these hyperbolic characterizations. Bartleby, Miss Lonelyhearts, and Patrick Bateman express their erratic and strange behavior primarily because they are natural *products* of their environment. These works do not teach us hardly anything about the psychopathy of a single man; they speak to the disorder of modern and postmodern American culture.

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