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'Too busy' to be 'special': Problems of individuality in 'The Midnight Bell' and *Twenty Thousand Streets Under The Sky*

In 'The Plains of Cement', the final story of Patrick Hamilton's trilogy, Ella is described as never having 'the smallest suspicion that she required special treatment—and indeed it never flashed across her mind that she did. She was too busy, among other things.'[1] Hamilton explores the impossibility of being 'special' in the rabble of London's lower-working class, in which all human experience is filtered through the metropolitan structures of money and time. In a city that waits for no one, our protagonists Bob, Jenny and Ella are defeated in turn by the indifference of the world around them, which is altogether 'too busy' for the multifarious problems and depressions of its constituent individuals. The city structures in *Twenty Thousand Streets* prescribe a mechanised, scheduled and schematic existence—and individuals who dare deviate from these structures in the delusion that they are 'special' are punished accordingly.

Marc Bloch, a French modernist contemporary of Hamilton's, wrote that one 'most distinctive' feature 'pits contemporary civilization against those that have preceded it: *speed*.'[2] Throughout *Twenty Thousand Streets* the frenetic atmosphere of London places an oppressive pressure upon our protagonists. Hamilton's study of pace is literalised in the act of *walking*: characters are characterised by their literal movements through the city. In 'The Midnight Bell', early episodes describe Bob as 'just strollin'' (50) through the streets, as he observes 'the shops, and the sights, and shoplit people' (49)—a leisurely activity which would associate Bob with the Parisian literary *flâneur* figure. However when Bob's love is repeatedly disregarded by Jenny, a local prostitute, his walks become increasingly agitated. Bob soon begins to pace through the city hurriedly as if literally chasing after some resolution. Becoming 'beyond responding to the situation', he simply propels himself through the streets in a helpless exertion of physical energy.

> He began on Shaftesbury Avenue. When arrived there he realized that he had pinned his hopes upon the corner of Dean Street […] She was, of course, not there. It was beginning to rain, but there were still many of her kind about. It was half-past four.
>
> He walked down Shaftesbury Avenue, down Wardour Street, round by the Corner House, up Rupert Street, round by the Pavilion and back to Wardour Street again. It was raining quite hard and growing dark. They lurked everywhere in shop doorways. (100-1)

Whereas previously Bob's wanderings stretched over several pages, embellished with reflections and observations (46-50), this unremarkable route is delineated perfunctorily, accompanied only by brief, prosaic notes of the time and weather. Bob's walking delineates the neuroticism of his mental

[1] Hamilton, Patrick, 'The Plains of Cement', *Twenty Thousand Streets Under The Sky*, London: Vintage (2004), p. 510.
[2] Bloch Marc, qtd. in *The Original Accident*, by Paul Virilio, Polity (2007), p. 3.

state, now stripped of the subjective, impressionistic gazing which previously characterised him. The sentences drive relentlessly on through the strings of clauses in mimic of Bob's own meaningless movements, the futility of which are delineated by the repetitious cycle of both the textual and ambulatory passage: beginning 'Round and round again', a later sentence in the passage is an exact repeated description of Bob's route. Baudelaire describes the *flâneur* figure as one whose 'walking or quickening his pace […] for ever in search' aims 'to extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope.[3] Whilst Bob is a self-confessed 'dreamer' (45) and aspiring writer, his perpetual 'search' is no longer so philosophical, appearing simply as an evasive physical compensation for the repression of emotional experience.

Not only is Bob removed from the city itself, but also separates himself from its people, observing afar 'her kind' (Jenny's fellow prostitutes), who 'lurked everywhere in shop doorways.' Baudelaire elucidates a description of the 'the perfect idler':

> For the passionate observer it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world […] and yet to be unseen of the world.[4]

The solitary experience of unrequited love distances Bob firmly from the 'throng', which Baudelaire envisions the city individual so a part of. Georg Simmel in his 1903 essay 'The Metropolis and the Mental Life' states in an appropriate paradox, 'one never feels as lonely and as deserted as in this metropolitan crush of persons'.[5] The nameless crowds which surround Bob appear collectively as part of the oppressively crowded nature of the city, describing the 'horrible scene' of 'millions and millions of people' 'as silent and placid as the machinery was bustling, resolute and violent' (58). Bob envisions London's citizens as submissive constituents of a wider urban machine, consequently latching on to Jenny as 'solace from the vast ramifications of civilization around him' (58). In a dangerous privilege of individual experience over societal assimilation, Bob separates himself for fear of dissolving into the mechanic fray. Walking is no longer purposed by the immersion of oneself in the surrounding city, but rather by a desperate desire for Jenny in particular:

> the fact remained that, whatever the cause, he was insanely anxious to get this delicious object by his side to come for a walk with him. Did it not all amount to the same thing?

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[3] Baudelaire, Charles, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, Phaidon Press (1995), p. 12
[4] Baudelaire, qt. in *The Flaneur*, Routledge (2014), by Keith Tester, p. 3.
[5] Simmel, Georg, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', *The Blackwell City Reader*, eds. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, Blackwell (2002), p. 16.

Bob himself here strips the act of walking of its symbolism; discarding 'cause' for effect, he considers that walking, regardless of its purpose, is walking. One becomes painfully aware of how despite Bob's fear of absorption into the 'millions', his exaggerated sense of individualism becomes increasingly undermined. Whist Bob may consider himself and Jenny apart from the rest of 'her kind', not only does he come to realise that Jenny will foil all of his beliefs in her uniqueness, but by pacing doggedly through the streets himself, never seems to realise that he too has become his own kind of street walker. Indeed; 'Did it not all amount to the same thing?' Just as the walking of the prostitutes is a business of economics, Bob's experience of love has rendered his own walking a simply operational act. Jenny is described in her own story, 'The Siege of Pleasure', as 'walking regularly and methodically round the London Pavilion' in an echo of Bob's own movement:

> at one moment she was in Shaftesbury Avenue, at the next she was in Piccadilly Circus, at the next in Great Windmill Street, and then in Shaftesbury Avenue again, and so on round. (223)

She remarks briefly of her worries that Bob 'was wandering round looking for her now (he had often done that sort of thing before)'. The shift in perspective between the interlinking stories allows the reader to witness the transportation of protagonists into the inconsequential fringes of the next narrative. Relationships which proffer meaning in one story are easily abandoned in the next; we see a similar parallel in Ella's fixation on Bob and his comparative disinterest in her. As is indicative of the brutal indifference of the city to individual perspectives, the reader is encouraged both to arbitrarily abandon previous sympathies and form new ones as one switches from narrative to narrative.

The seeming lack of distinction between significant characters and insignificant characters reflects a general urban inability to distinguish significance: in a drunk pub dialogue 'discussing Women', Mr. Wall posits to the others, 'is is Woman *Woman* or ain't she? That's all. Is Woman Woman, or ain't she?', and further to this, 'Is Love *Love,* or ain't it?' In his drunken repetitions and Hamilton's characteristic capitalisation, the exaggerations of the words 'woman' and 'love' come to suggest signifiers which have been idealised and mythologised to the detrimental loss of the referent. Questioning what 'women' and 'love' really mean, one is tempted to wonder whether Bob's prostitute love interest is really his '*Woman'*, and if his few and far between meetings with her could really be facilitating '*Love'*. In answer to the latter of Mr. Wall's questions, of course 'Bob had always believed it to be'—and yet the very next paragraph describes Jenny's failure once again to show up to an appointed date. Michael Holdroyd in his introduction to the novel remarks that 'The Midnight Bell' was first published with the subtitle "A Love Story",

> But the word love, though desperately repeated in the many blurred conversations, *loses all particular meaning* and becomes a *vague shorthand* for what the characters imagine they

> want – the possession of beauty, money or security: in short, the possession of the unattainable.[6] [emphasis added]

Despite being 'desperately repeated', these terms of personal experience ring hollow in meaning. In one of Bob's most drunken exchanges, a 'seedy little Jew' argues for the existence of God by stating, 'You could prove the existence of God […] by the Principle of Mathematics', 'What, he asked did two and two make? Four, Said Bob […] Well, said the seedy little Jew, there you were.' (212). Andy posits to Jenny in 'The Siege of Pleasure', 'What was the use of life without a Mate? One was one, and two was two, weren't they?', Jenny 'emphatically' returning that 'they were' (285). Simmel describes the metropolitan mind as a 'calculating' one, suffering 'the reduction of qualitative values to quantitative terms'.[7] Subjective concepts such as 'love' and 'God' are no longer understood, their meaning contrived only through attempts of repetitive doubling, parodic capitalisation or trite arithmetic metaphor.

Time keeping is crucial to this 'quantitative' impulse of the city; and for Bob and Jenny the inability to do so leads to disaster. Jenny states that her life is one of the 'usual—Heck Tick—time', and indeed, such seems the case to Bob whom she leaves endlessly waiting in vain for her appearance. As I have stated, one learns in Hamilton's writing that words which have been capitalised are not especially to be trusted. Jenny swears in turn on her 'Liberty' (116), her 'Mother's Life' (149), her 'Mother's Grave' (150), and finally her 'life' (204), that she will meet Bob, and these promises are all eventually broken. Again the capitalised signifiers are essentially disposable, but equally damaging as Jenny's disregard for language is her disregard for scheduling. Unable even to 'name the time' allocated upon Bob's request, he declares, 'Her inconsequence was awful. Her Mother's Grave would have been wasted on thin air.' (151). Simmel states of the metropolis:

> the lack of the most exact punctuality in promises and performances would cause the whole to break down into an inextricable chaos. If all the watches in Berlin suddenly went wrong in different ways even only as much as an hour, its entire economic and commercial life would be derailed for some time.[8]

In 'The Siege of Pleasure' we see Jenny's developing alcoholism dissolve all her sense of 'punctuality' or 'promises' into 'thin air'. Already hung over and late for work, she delays her return with whiskeys to the point where she abandons her job all together. Jenny's habit for violating the two key proponents of working city life—those of contracts and schedules—thus 'derail[s]' Bob's story into a comparable abandonment of order—a destructive, 'inextricable chaos'.

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[6] Holdroyd, Michael, 'Introduction', *Twenty Thousand Streets Under The Sky*, p. v.
[7] Simmel, p. 13.
[8] Simmel, p. 13.

This devolution is most notable in the final episode, after a tortured dialogue in which Bob forces Jenny to insist, repeatedly, that she will be there on Boxing Day for the planned holiday to Brighton.

> "Under the clock—Victoria Station—day after to-morrow—Boxing Day—you promise?"
> "Yes. I promise."
> "What time?"
> "Six o'clock."
> "You swear on your life?"
> "Yes. I swear on my life."
> There was nothing more he could do.
> […]
> "Promise again, Jenny. I'll give you such a good time, if you'll come. I've got a lot more money."
> "I promise on my life."
> "Do you love me, Jenny?"
> "Yes. You know I love you. Don't be such a silly old Bob." (207)

Bob's paranoid need for assurance exposes the very fact of its impossibility. Anchoring the meeting 'Under the clock', Bob tries desperately to re-establish a necessary order to their relationship. Repeating himself, asking her to repeat as well, testing her on the details, asking for promises and promises on her life, and asking whether she loves him, Bob grasps increasingly desperately for the ability to have faith in her, all the while somewhat aware that as the number of promises expand so will the eventual devastation in discovering their falseness. The frantic nature of the dialogue reflects the frantic nature of his walking, as Bob grapples helplessly with a dream that will always elude him. Naively appealing to give Jenny 'a good time', he appears to have forgotten that she understands only 'Heck Tick—time', having abandoned any order in her own life to a life of alcohol and prostitution. Only such chaotic, decrepit, *disasters* of identity come to fruition in Hamilton's London.

After Jenny 'did not come' for the final time, upon the dawning of this realisation the story sees an entropic spiral into complete 'inextricable chaos'. With no further recourse to fall back on, and having been able to neither keep up with Jenny through the streets nor pin her down to any specific time, Bob finally acquiesces to fatalistic self-destruction; 'He was, perhaps, almost enjoying himself.' (210) He states earlier on of Jenny,

> It seemed as though she were some alluring and irresistible pilot, leading him on and downwards (for his sins and weakness) through every circle of hell—to atmospheres which formed her own sorrowful lot, but in which he could hardly breathe. (192)

The downwards spiral through which Bob hurls himself is indeed comparable to a modern fall from grace, his experience of love not enlightening him but rather stripping all leisure and meaning from

his previous state (he used to be a sailor), plunging him into an urban world governed by the breakable principles of promises and punctuality. As Eve tempts Adam into damnation, the 'alluring and irresistible' Jenny entices Bob into her own world of suffocating cruelty; of the damned urban individual. As Bob's naïve romantic impulses for individualism sees him take time into his own hands, rushing through the streets for resolution and feigning family emergencies for more time off work to see Jenny, he falls into a world of disorder in which the structures of the city can no longer support him. Indeed, in the final passage, 'Bob conceived it his duty to get wildly drunk and do mad things':

> He had no authentic craving to do so: he merely objectivized himself as an abused and terrible character, and surrendered to the explicit demands of drama. The motivation of popular fiction in behaviour—the susceptibility of mankind to poetic precedents—are subjects which will one day be treated with the gravity they deserve. (211)

Bob, the aspiring writer and 'dreamer', appears in this passage to be self-indulgently writing himself into a position of the victimised hero; 'he … objectivised himself as an abused and terrible character'. The disaster of individuality has now become a narrative disaster: Hamilton's prose in itself denies Bob the 'theatricality' of 'drama' nor the high-calibre of 'poet[ry]', lamenting in a detached voice of mankind's delusions of grandeur. Again, the signifiers in 'The Midnight Bell' bear no poetic resonance beyond their base 'signified's: despite Bob's hopes of achieving 'something of magnificence and import',

> The fact that, in deliberately attempting to get wildly drunk and do mad things, he might actually get wildly drunk, and actually do mad things, completely eluded him. (211)

The repetition of 'get wildly drunk' and 'do mad things' throughout the whole passage hammers in the city's inability to accommodate secondary, poetic, significations. In this perverted state of half-enjoyment, Bob evidences the failure of subjective experience in the city. In 'The Siege of Pleasure' Jenny marvels at her clients, 'these little men, to whom an evening of delight […] entailed such strenuous mental suffering' (224). Bob's torturous time with her sets him no further above any of these men, stating in response to Jenny's 'Why don't you cheer up?', 'I can't. I love you too much.' (200). Ultimately in Hamilton's London, the characters find themselves continuously in miserable opposition to their desired states; this 'aggravating' 'stalemate' is described by Laura Catherine Frost as 'the impasse of pleasure'.[9] She continues, 'characters tell themselves that they want to do the sensible, bourgeois thing (save money, get married, stay sober), but they consistently do just the opposite: the thing that makes them most miserable'.[10] Pleasure is not contingent with love in

[9] Frost, Laura Catherine, *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and its Discontents*, Columbia University Press (2013), n. pag.
[10] Frost, n. pag.

Twenty Thousand Streets, as the characters find themselves in an irresolvable push and pull between the desire for long term security and instant gratification. The inability to correctly process one's subjective experiences renders only base, objective reality as comprehensible. Hamilton exposes in his writing what Holdroyd praises as a 'vivid facsimile' of 'this malignant city as it was' for the lower-working class of London's forgotten corners.[11] P. J. Widdowson notes that in Hamilton's dystopian *Impromptu in Moribundia*,

> art, literature and poetry' are satirised by as taking on 'a more and more painfully subjective aspect, more and more the character of meaning masturbation, there being no future which they can fertilize.[12]

In the city and its 'endless plains of cement' in which the pub is an 'incongruous and grotesque' haven (333), Hamilton exposes a place in which organic feeling and experience has been bastardised by the economic and temporal structures of the metropolis, with alcohol serving as a narcotic substitute to personal emotional fulfilment.

Getting drunk is described in Jenny's interior discourse as 'the feeling of good news without the good news'; the absurdity of feeling 'good' 'without the good news' gestures once more to an abandonment of meaning. Jenny herself is Bob's own 'erotic and deadly drug now utterly indispensable alike to his spiritual and nervous system[.] And she was nothing else.' (158). Whiskey is described as a beverage of demonic possession, 'the potion of raging madness' (211) which substitutes Bob's stunted emotional capacity with chemical narcosis. Alcoholism thus allegorises the desperation for sensation in a world of no meaning: where there 'was nothing else'. As stated by Widdowson,

> Alcohol is the symptom, the motif, in Hamilton's world, of the personal crisis, of irresponsibility, of failure and breakdown, of an inability to cope with the world, and of decline and inadequacy.[13]

Bob's self-destructive final passage effects this motif:

> Only the conviction that he was not yet drunk and abandoned, and that he must at all costs become so—only the diabolic fancy that tonight he was saying good-bye to his past life—that he must spend and spite himself without stint or regret, obsessed him.

Bob now throws himself nevertheless more resolutely into directionless abandon, the staggering of the clauses, strung together with hyphens and ending in ellipses, mimetic of Bob's own inconclusive

[11] Holdroyd, p. viii.
[12] Widdowson, P. J., 'The Saloon Bar Society: Patrick Hamilton's fiction in the 1930s', *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, vol. 20 (1976), n. pag.
[13] Widdowson, n. pag.

staggering. The narrative exhibits a disregard for any of the conversations of the night, the dialogue embedded haphazardly into the narrative, the devastating report of Jenny spending all of Bob's money to get 'blind drunk' no more commented upon than the inconsequential arguments which Bob undertakes with a fellow drunk. As the sentences follow one another beginning with temporal conjunctives ('After', 'And then […] And all at once […] And he suddenly […] And then […] And then all at once' (214-5)), the narrative no longer follows Bob's careful counting of minutes which has pervaded the narrative thus far; 'Five minutes to seven came […] five past seven came […] By five and twenty past' (68), 'Six o'clock came. […] Five past six. A quarter past six.' (210)—Bob has learnt that his personal dream was never actually to be scheduled into his life. The syntactical disintegration of Bob's memories fashions the same disintegration of that order and meaning which the impulse for individualism must reckon with. The passage thus presents the consequent effects of disregarding the city's governing structures; Simmel's catastrophe of the unsynchronised 'watches of Berlin' in microcosm.

Indeed, he begins his 'Metropolis and the Mental Life' essay by stating:

> The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society.[14]

The accepted inhabitant of the metropolis is one who assumes a role—even the pub is described as a place of artifice, with Bob and Ella 'aware of the part they played', 'behind-scenes just before the show' (13). Despite the characters' belief in their 'shared distinction from the besieging many' (13), they assume the jobs designated to them by class and society. In fact, what might be described as moments of real individuality in *Twenty Thousand Streets*—that is, moments of honest, genuine emotion—are ultimately tragic and bathetic. 'The Midnight Bell' ends with the exhilarated shouts of Bob's interior monologue, 'Now! No time to waste. He had wasted enough time. [..] Now! Now! Now!', as he decides to become a sailor again: 'The sea! The solution—salvation!'(220). Bob as we know, is a 'dreamer', and making this realisation on top of Westminster Bridge, is suggested to be invoking a Wordsworthian, romantic inspiration. Yet how convincing is this apparent epiphany? His story ends with drunkenness and the sea, just as it begins, the opening paragraph detailing a dream in which he sails away considering the 'unreal' 'land he had just left', unable to 'move', before waking up to the 'burden of cold and ever-recurring existence' (11). The disconcerting sea analogy is reminiscent of the infamous closing lines of *The Great Gatsby*, in which 'we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.'[15] Bob's impetus to go to the sea can be seen as nothing more than another panicked propulsion forwards in the event of having 'no idea' how to

[14] Simmel, p. 11
[15] Fitzgerald, Scott F., *The Great Gatsby*, London: Penguin (1926), p. 188.

respond, a mere 'dream' to return to an irretrievable past, which will be no doubt as paralysing and temporary as the voyage which begins the story. The disillusionment of the city, Bob's descent through the 'circle[s] of Hell', will not be redeemed by this fancy for an inaccessible prelapsarian existence. Indeed, reading on exposes Bob's lingering presence in the other stories—particularly Ella's which reveals that for all his 'Now!'s, Bob in fact stays in London for at least another week before he goes to sea—narratively speaking, at least, he does not truly depart at all.

In some ways Jenny becomes physically absorbed into the city by becoming a woman of the street, which defines her own individuality, 'The Siege of Pleasure' ending as she watches the formerly heroic figure of Andy become equally 'swallowed up for ever in the great world of London' (322). However, perhaps the most tragic moment of individuality concludes 'The Plains of Cement':

> But at about half-past ten that night, John, the new waiter at "The Midnight Bell," coming up tired to bed after a hard day's work in the job he had taken on, listened, and heard the barmaid weeping. (510)

Just before the ending, Ella's story, which involves not hedonistic abandon as the others but an equally self-destructive passivity, is summarised by the narrator:

> And indeed, what had taken place in those dull months? Nothing, really, whatever—nothing out of the common lot of any girl in London, if you came to think about it. (509)

For all of Ella's pain, she is reduced nevertheless to 'nothing out of the common lot of any girl in London'. Being both unnamed and overheard by a minor character, Ella suffers a private moment of heartbreak which undercuts the 'normal and anticipated repose' of the pub that would otherwise read as the ending of the story; it is as if this exhibition of emotion has slipped in as an accident of the narrative. No doubt John will continue into the next day without saying a word to Ella, just as Bob and Ella had previously feigned ignorance of hearing each other's personal movements through the wall separating their rooms. It appears that even the narrative itself cannot comfortably accommodate the tragedy of Ella's individual existence.

Widdowson's criticism of *Twenty Thousand Streets* is that his characters are 'instances rather than representatives':

> These novels stick at the individual and the specific; the stories seem inconsequential; and the author's voice, with little support from its own fictional world, merely remains one individual's voice with an observation to make, pointing up significances we cannot verify.[16]

[16] Widdowson, n. pag.

However, it is precisely the simultaneous specificity and inconsequentiality, the indifference of the narrative voice to its characters, and the undermining of 'significances' which render the novel so mimetic of the London which Hamilton wishes to portray. Hamilton's own protagonists are continually disregarded by their fellow characters, and even often by the authorial voice itself. Looking to make 'observation', Hamilton exposes in documentary style realism the unembellished lives of the over-looked ordinary. Blaming Hamilton's 'reliance on reportage and commentary' for the 'ultimate inconsequentiality of these novels', Widdowson states that 'In *Twenty Thousand Streets*, the bottle of Haig in the suitcase means alcoholism. Nothing More.'[17] In lamenting the lack of 'common metaphorical significance' in the novel, he appears to have unwittingly touched upon Hamilton's entire, unglamorous point; for as we know, just as alcoholism is 'Nothing More', so is Jenny 'nothing else' but 'an erotic and deadly drug now utterly indispensible' (158). *Twenty Thousand Streets* utilises an unfeeling narrative to expose an unfeeling city, in which romanticism is the ruin of the individual. Widdowson is correct in his declaration that the protagonists are 'instances' rather than representations, for Hamilton's evasive characterisation effects the impatience of a city which equally does not afford its citizens the time for full personal development. The metropolis, as Simmel has suggested, marches on in indifference to those who have fallen out of its sync, lest the entire system devolve into 'inextricable chaos'. Bob, Jenny and Ella indeed bear no 'distinction from the besieging many' (13), as, for all their pains, each of our protagonists is afforded only an 'instance' of existence amidst an infinite mass of others—just one of twenty thousand streets.

[17] Widdowson, n. pag.

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