



Malina Załużna-Łuczkiewicz

The University College of Applied Sciences in Chełm (Poland)

ORCID: 0000-0002-0181-4482

**Inwards as the way out? Sources of suffering
and the protagonists' coping strategies in *Bartleby*,
the Scrivener by Herman Melville,
My Year of Rest and Relaxation by Ottessa Mosfegh
and *The New Me* by Halle Butler**

**Wycofanie jako droga wyjścia? Przyczyny cierpienia i strategie
przetrwania bohaterów w utworach *Kopista Bartleby*.
Historia z Wall Street Hermana Melville'a,
Mój rok relaksu i odpoczynku Ottessy Mosfegh
i *Nowa ja* Halle Butler**

Abstract

The article aims to show analogies between three literary works: *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* by Herman Melville, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Mosfegh and *The New Me* by Halle Butler. I will focus on the following points of convergence in these texts: surveillance, the nature of work and the effectiveness of the protagonists' coping strategies. I will draw on some of the existing literature on *Bartleby*, the works of Francesco Berardi and David Graeber on work, Barbara L. Fredrikson and Tomi-Ann Roberts' paper on the objectification of female body as well as Michel Foucault's study of surveillance and Jonathan Crary's book on sleep.

Key words: *Bartleby*, *Halle Butler*, *Ottessa Mosfegh*, *work*, *surveillance*, *coping strategies*.

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie analogii pomiędzy trzema utworami: *Kopista Bartleby. Historia z Wall Street* Hermana Melville'a, *Mój rok relaksu i odpoczynku* Ottessy Mosfegh i *Nowa ja* Halle Butler. Przeanalizuję następujące cechy wspólne utworów: inwigilacja, charakter pracy i strategie przetrwania bohaterów. W artykule wykorzystam istniejące publikacje na temat *Bartleby'ego*, studia Francesca Berardiego i Davida Graebera poświęcone pracy, Michela Foucault z dziedziny inwigilacji, Jonathana Crary'ego dotyczące snu oraz artykuł Barbary L. Fredrikson i Tomi-Ann Roberts o uprzedmiotowieniu kobiecego ciała.

Słowa kluczowe: *Bartleby, Halle Butler, Ottessa Mosfegh, praca, inwigilacja, strategie przetrwania.*

Introduction

When *Bartleby, the Scrivener's* words "I'd prefer not to" became the slogan for Occupy Wall Street Movement in 2011, the non-literary world was reminded of the quiet copyist, who refused to give in to his employer's requests to keep on rewriting legal documents. The relevance of this character to twenty-first century anti-capitalists who united themselves against the greed of the corporate banking system and skewed distribution of wealth points to the fact that although we live in post industrial capitalism, more than a century and a half later than the modest nay-sayer, they share common ground. For literary scholars *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* has been a canonical text analyzed from various angles in innumerable papers. In this article I will try to draw some similarities between *Bartleby* and two characters from works by contemporary American writers – the nameless narrator in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Mosfegh and Millie, the protagonist of *The New Me* by Halle Butler. I will argue that for these characters passive rebellion directed inwards is not sustainable and in order to survive they have to move outside themselves. I am going to draw on the existing research on *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, ideas of the economic anthropologist and anarchist David Graeber, Jonathan Crary's study of sleep in late capitalism, Michel Foucault's study of surveillance, L. Fredrikson and Tomi-Ann Roberts' paper on the objectification of female body as well as the work of Franco Berardi on cognitariat and the changing nature of labour in the last decades.

The body of research on *Bartleby, the Scrivener* is extensive with left-wing scholars focusing on the nature of *Bartleby's* work environment and its

effects on this character as well as his passive protest or rather non-protest. They also analyze the relationship between him and the narrator who owns the law firm. Barbara Foley grounds Bartleby in the social history of the mid nineteenth century New York looking for revelatory clues in seemingly unimportant details of the historical background and Louise K. Barnett in her seminal article focuses on Bartleby as an alienated worker. Leo Marx in *Melville's Parable of the Walls* tries to interpret the text juxtaposing Bartleby with Melville himself, finding numerous parallels⁴. Naomi Reed interprets Bartleby as someone disrupting relations of equivalence in capitalism. In *Bartleby's Consensual Dysphoria* Robin West focuses on the jurisprudential changes of Melville's time and sees the source of Bartleby's malady in the denial of his hedonic self. Gilles Deleuze in turn perceives Bartleby as a completely passive outsider who neither rebels nor agrees, which is epitomized by the formula "I'd prefer not to." Deleuze argues that the nature of the phrase distances Bartleby from the world and makes this character unknowable and obviates the idea of his social position. (Deleuze, 1998, p. 71) The approach to Bartleby the character in the literature is either taking him as a symbol to be filled with meaning, for example, the symbol of alienated labour, or focusing on his mental health, as exemplified by Leo Marx's work. What gives rise to such interpretations is that Bartleby is an enigma, the biggest mystery of this story. Apart from the fact that he worked in the Dead Letter Office, the reader knows nothing of his past, his family background, his social circle and, last but not least, his motivations. As a result, just like Melville's Moby Dick, Bartleby has a remarkable symbolic potential.

Bartleby is truly unknowable and confusing; his behavior is unfathomable for everyone, including the narrator. Initially, hired to copy legal documents, he engages in this activity with fervor, as if hungry for work, but soon he starts to react to every request made by his employer with the evasive formula "I'd prefer not to." This uncanny passivity throws the whole office off balance. Soon all the employees and their boss begin to act out of character. What makes his reticence even more bewildering is that he also rejects multiple alternative offers of employment (a travelling companion, errand boy) and even a charitable invitation to live with his employer. Besides copying is not even particularly demanding – he is not a factory worker laboring at the assembly line. To the contrary, his employer takes relatively good care of him. The narrator even worries about Bartleby's deteriorating eyesight. When, to the lawyer's dismay, it turns out that the scrivener actually lives on the premises never leaving his workplace, the narrator is forced to take action. He offers extra money to coax Bartleby into leaving but it comes to

no avail and rumour spreads about the unruly employee among other Wall Street professionals. So, the narrator finds a new place for his law firm, and Bartleby is left behind. Eventually the scrivener ends up in prison charged with vagrancy. Even at the Tombs his former employer visits him and offers to pay for his food. So, Bartleby is not trapped in his job but at the same time he is not interested in any other options and finally chooses to starve himself to death.

The events in the 2018 novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Mosfegh take place a hundred and fifty years after the story of Bartleby in the same city in the year 2000 leading up to 9/11. The nameless protagonist and narrator of the novel is a misanthropic pretty, young and wealthy WASP woman and an art history graduate who comes up with an idea for a one-year hibernation project. Having inherited a substantial sum of money after her parents' death, she has means to survive for a period of time without the need to work. After finding a comically incompetent psychiatrist in the Yellow Pages, she feigns insomnia and anxiety, which enables her to procure a collection of sleeping pills and anti-anxiety medications that let her remain asleep for extended periods of time. Grieving the loss of her parents, hating herself, life and other people as well as disillusioned with an idea of achieving stability by means of work in an art gallery, she decides to take her sleeping project to the next level. Her plan is to sleep (with a few-hour breaks every three days for eating and exercising) for six months straight and see if after this period of regeneration her perception of reality remains the same. If that is the case, she will commit suicide. There is a mishap in her project since the side effect of one medication makes her go outside clubbing, shopping and visiting beauty parlors with no memory of these events afterwards. So, she makes a pact with Ping Xi, an artist from her old workplace to keep her locked in her flat with only him having the key and delivering food in exchange for supplying herself, or rather her sleeping body, as a material for an unspecified art project.

The setting of *The New Me* like in two other works is also New York and the protagonist is a millennial woman around thirty whose main problem in life seems to be the inability to find steady employment. Millie, like the protagonist of *My Year* feels isolated from other people. She has just one friend she secretly hates. Millie spends most of her free time locked in her apartment binge watching TV and feeling hate and pity for herself as exemplified by her typical train of thought,

“Poor me, poor me, who cares. This is what I wanted. To sit here and not have someone judging me. I’m fat, I smell, no one likes me,

my clothes suck, I'll never amount to anything, everyone around me is an idiot, self-involved, judgmental, stupid, too dumb to know the harm they're doing, too dumb to know they're not happy inside, not like me, I know. Ha-ha-ha". (Butler, 2019, p. 38)

The narration is first person and the reader gets access to Millie's thoughts which are a mixture of self-loathing and hostility towards other people. The realities of working life depress her and she is stuck between hating her job and badly needing it at the same time.

Surveillance

In all the works discussed in this paper the characters undergo some form of surveillance. Bartleby is located in the office of the lawyer behind a folding ground glass door. The narrator can detect Bartleby's motion behind the screen and knows if he is working or just staring at the wall and can also call him any time he wants. Of course, it is the narrator who decides whether to fold the doors. "I procured a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice. And thus, in a manner, privacy and society were conjoined". (Melville, 2009, p. 11) He wants Bartleby conveniently close at hand, ready to answer his calls, at the same time creating an illusion of privacy. The lawyer starts to take a keen interest in Bartleby after his first refusal to examine copies of legal documents. He notices that Bartleby never goes out anywhere and lives on ginger nuts supplied by the office boy. The narrator starts speculating about the connection between Bartleby's diet (spicy ginger nuts) and his temperament (sedate) and finds no connection. He concludes that if Bartleby had an angry spark in him, it would be easier to deal with him, but because he is so passive, the lawyer is confused and helpless. As the story progresses and Bartleby's reticence becomes a greater source of discomfort, the boss decides to inspect the drawer of Bartleby's desk justifying his prying with the argument that, after all, just like the law firm, the desk belongs to him, so he has the right to go through it. In the drawer he finds the copyist's savings and under the desk the traces of him spending nights at the office. The kind of supervision exercised by the narrator is described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* with regard to the changing nature of surveillance in factories reaching a more sophisticated level: "[...] what was now needed was an intense, continuous supervision; it ran right through the labour process; it did not bear – or not only – on production [...]; it also took into account the activity of the men, their skill, the way they set

about their tasks, their promptness, their zeal, their behavior.” (Foucault, 1995, p. 164) We see the same kind of approach in the relationship between the lawyer and his employees. The boss knows the strengths and weaknesses of his older workers (temper, drinking habits) and intelligently uses them to achieve maximum productivity by way of manipulation. He also observes Bartleby trying to work out what kind of a person the copyist is. As an employer the narrator is far from using old-fashioned and ineffective coercion. His source of power is observation and manipulation. The prying eye is not only that of the narrator but also other characters, for instance guards at the Tombs. The reader feels Bartleby is under constant scrutiny. But even though the copyist’s movements are tracked, the surveillance is futile. It does not bring the narrator nor the reader for that matter any closer to the solution of the mystery Bartleby is.

Millie in *The New Me* is also watched by her supervisor, Karen. This surveillance echoes Foucault’s reflections on disciplinary mechanisms like panopticism (after the Panopticon, a prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in such a way that a guard can see all the prisoners but they cannot see him). The effectiveness of this form of surveillance lies in the fact that those who are watched never know when they are watched: “[...] the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so”. (Foucault, 1995, p. 188) The reason for Millie’s failures at work is that most of the time due to her self-absorption she seems to forget that she is being watched. She is shocked at the realization that she is under Karen’s radar: “[...] out of the corner of my eye, I see Karen’s looking at me. She’s mixing her yogurt with a spoon and does not break eye contact when I glance over. I’m startled [...]”. (Butler, 2019, p. 24) Unsurprisingly, Millie assumes her transgressions at work like being late, leaving documents unshredded, or wearing scruffy clothes pass unnoticed, which is not the case. Karen even checks Millie’s computer at work: “The search history was surprisingly normal. Household organizing tips, a few searches for designers that the showroom represented, recipes, low-cost clothing, news articles, a calculator”. (Butler, 2019, p. 18) Millie naively assumes she is invisible to her supervisor and does not self-regulate her behavior accordingly, for example, she takes a voided check home from her workplace: “I put it in my notebook when no one is looking (no one is ever looking)”. (Butler, 2019, p. 36) Parts of the novel are narrated by the limited-omniscient narrator. As a result, the reader gets access to Karen’s thoughts and we know that she carefully scrutinizes Millie and does not like what she sees. Attitudinal irony used in parts of the novel results in the ominous atmosphere. The reader al-

ready knows Millie is up for a chop, when she herself believes that she may be even offered a permanent contract, simultaneously desiring and dreading it.

In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* the narrator undergoes the scrutiny of a different kind. Because she is the epitome of attractiveness, other people's gaze constantly follows her. She, unlike Millie, is aware of that at all times. Dressing for a job interview at Ducat, the art gallery she has to strike the right kind of balance between understated sophistication, appropriate in the artistic milieu, and modesty so as not to intimidate her prospective employer too much. She's aware that she got the job at a reception desk thanks to her good looks more than anything else. Moreover, her on and off abusive boyfriend Trevor breaks up with her because, arguably, she is too pretty: "Blondes are distracting. Think of your beauty as an Achilles' heel. You're too much on the surface. I don't say that offensively. But it's the truth. It's hard to look past what you look like". (Mosfegh, 2018, p. 29) It is not only the male gaze, however. Her best friend, Reva, who is the only visitor in her apartment constantly scrutinizes the narrator's weight and attire. Being a materialistic creature Reva regularly inspects the contents of the narrator's wardrobe, commenting on her expensive taste with jealousy, and carefully registering her friend's weight loss.

The narrator slipping into depression wants to escape the prison of her mind and body. Her own beauty and its effect on other people feels like a burden; the hibernation project is supposed to enable her to form a completely new identity and go beyond her looks. Even before it starts, she begins to neglect her appearance: "Over the final few months, I had stopped dressing up for work. I just sat at my desk in a hooded sweatshirt, three-day-old mascara caked and smeared around my eyes, I lost things. I confused things". (Mosfegh, 2018, p. 34) Prior to the final six-month phase of her sleeping she gets rid of most of her material possessions: furniture, clothes and jewellery. Even so, when her project is nearing completion, the narrator cannot refrain from noticing and making mental commentaries about her own attractiveness, which surprisingly remains uncompromised, in spite of her diminished interest in personal grooming. "In the gold-tone doors of the elevator up to my apartment, I still looked good. I looked like a young Lauren Bacall the morning after. I'm a disheveled Joan Fontaine, I thought. Unlocking the door to my apartment, I was Kim Novak. "You're prettier than Sharon Stone," Reva would have said. She was right". (Mosfegh, 2018, p. 145) This preoccupation with appearances pervades the pages of the book and even though the narrator endeavours to cut herself off from her old self and form a new identity, she constantly gazes at herself through other people's eyes: Reva's, men's, Ping Xi's or her employer's.

This attitude is in keeping with the observations made in the sociocultural analysis of women's bodies by Barbara L. Fredrikson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, who posit the objectification theory in order to account for women's relationship to their bodies. (Fredrikson, Roberts, 1997) They state that women's bodies are objectified in the contemporary culture and this objectification is subsequently internalized, so women are constantly vigilant monitoring their appearance because they look at themselves through other people's eyes. This state of alertness takes a toll on their well-being, for example, it prevents them from being fully absorbed in any mental or physical activity as a result lowering their quality of life. Another consequence of the preoccupation with appearance is women's proneness to depression, which is the case for the narrator in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* who, after all, embarks on her sleeping project because she feels life is not worth living. Interestingly, the narrator does not see any flaws in her appearance, but still the fact that she is looked at with envy by other women and desired by men does not make her happy; she is still objectified. Being engrossed in the appearances, is the hardest thing to shake off because it is so ingrained in the reality of late capitalism, which New York City itself with its pre-9/11 seemingly inexhaustible potential and the art scene the narrator is part of embodies. Eventually, however, the sleeping project turns out to be a success. The narrator emerges as a new person. In her bare apartment she wakes up to a new life which begins with her spending weeks on a park bench dressed in track pants and a hoodie while listening to jazz on the battery-operated radio. Just like the main character, New York, the city the novel is set in, undergoes a transformation. The attack on the World Trade Centre inevitably changes the previous paradigm. The status quo of the wounded city is never to be restored and the tragedy has a ripple effect on the characters of the novel. Reva, so earthly-minded and, just like the narrator, constantly preoccupied with her looks (in her case – real and imagined flaws), passes to her eternal reward jumping off one of the towers.

Cognitariat and pointless jobs

Two female characters discussed here could be classified as cognitive workers or cognitariat. It is defined by Berardi as: "the social corporeality of cognitive labour". (Berardi, 2005, p. 57) This group, as opposed, to factory workers has a tendency to let their work intrude on their personal lives, even when they are not working. It is particularly evident in *The New Me* because the subjects of conversations the characters have in their free

time keep on revolving around work or the lack of it. According to Franco Berardi the tendency to invest more energy in work is the result of the atrophy of human relationships and the boredom of city life. “A consequence of this dis-eroticisation of daily life is the investment of desire in work, understood as the sole space of narcissistic reaffirmation for an individuality used to seeing the other according to the rules of competition, that is, as a danger, an impoverishment, a limitation rather than a source of enrichment, pleasure and experience”. (Berardi, 2005, p. 60) Although Bartleby is not exactly a cognitive worker involved in net-economy, what makes him similar to modern cognitariats is his total isolation from the rest of the world.

When the narrator realizes Bartleby has no other life apart from work and is completely friendless, he is shocked and feels pity for him. The depths of Bartleby’s loneliness prevent the narrator from taking a more decisive action when it comes to evicting his unruly employee and Bartleby’s sentence is temporarily suspended. However, there is no consolation in the work itself. The nature of the copyist’s work is with all honesty described by the lawyer in the following way: “It is a very dull, wearisome, and lethargic affair. I can readily imagine that, to some sanguine temperaments, it would be altogether intolerable. For example, I cannot credit that the mettlesome poet, Byron, would have contentedly sat down with Bartleby to examine a law document of, say five hundred pages, closely written in a crimped hand”. (Melville, 2009, p. 11) So, the lawyer himself admits that it takes a special person not to be bored to death by this job. This work is just as mind numbing as assembly line labour. And it has to be pointed out that the job is starting to take its toll on Bartleby’s body too – the lawyer thinks Bartleby’s eyesight is deteriorating. Berardi notices that cognitariats’ bodies get affected as well. After all, people are bodily creatures and the total separation of the body from the cognitive sphere is impossible. (Berardi, 2005, p. 57) According to Berardi people invest a lot of energy in their work when the outside world does not have much to offer in terms of social life or familial bonds. This seems to be the case with Bartleby, who at least initially behaves as if he was hungry for work: “As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents”. (Melville, 2009, p. 11) Nonetheless, his enthusiasm gradually dissipates. The nature of this job simply stifles seal. First, he refuses to collate, then to copy and finally all he does is stare at the wall. Even having such a dreary poorly paid job would be bearable if there were meaningful relationships with people one could fall back on while not working, which is not the case for Bartleby.

Leo Marx in his article *Melville's Parable of the Walls* argues that mindless copying and collating of the legal documents is the equivalent of Melville's writing adventure fiction that sold well but did not let him fully realize his artistic ambition. Melville was preoccupied with serious philosophical issues but knew books on such a subject would not be a commercial success and as a result they could not put bread on his table. So, just like the sedate copyist, Melville was stuck with the job he hated. Bartleby's work cannot save him or bring happiness because of what it makes him be: a human copying machine. Marx posits that Bartleby refuses to copy and stares at the blank wall because the wall is a metaphor for the metaphysical themes that dominated Melville's later work and separated him from other people. Indeed, Bartleby a human copying machine shares the same fate with two other employees in the law firm but his alienation is more extreme than theirs. He never talks unless he is asked a questions, he has no relationships with Turkey and Nippers, who themselves are no strangers to adverse effects of the kind of job they have to do. Turkey takes to the bottle and Nippers, his antithesis, suffers from stomach issues in the morning but does not get too depressed because he has ambitions and attempts to independently draw up some legal documents. Their reactions to the oppressive nature of work are more natural and, whereas Bartleby's stupor is bewildering.

Withdrawal and detachment from other people are the similarities between the protagonists in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *Bartleby*. If Reva did not visit the narrator, she would never reach out to her. She is aware of what a terrible friend she is and at some point fantasizes about Reva seeing through her and ending their friendship in a goodbye letter carefully crafted with her counselor's help. The narrator has no other friends, in fact, she feels intense hatred for mankind. For a moment she hopes that work would be an antidote to the hatred poisoning her. Prior to the hibernation project, she believes that doing normal things like going to work will make her less misanthropic, but it does not help. Yet another parallel between *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *Bartleby, the Scrivener* occurs when the narrator compares her work in an art gallery to a Wall Street job. This is how she reflects on the nature of the artistic world:

“The art world had turned out to be like the stock market, a reflection of political trends and the persuasions of capitalism, fueled by greed and gossip and cocaine. I might as well have worked on Wall Street. Speculation and opinions drove not only the market but the products, sadly, the values of which were hinged not to the ineffable quality of art as a sacred human ritual – a value

impossible to measure, anyway – but to what a bunch of rich assholes thought would “elevate” their portfolios and inspire jealousy and, delusional as they all were, respect. I was perfectly happy to wipe out all that garbage from my mind”. (Mosfegh, 2018, p. 115)

What transpires here is her disillusionment with the cynicism of the art scene; its games and squabbles. Also the kind of art exhibited at Ducat is like a parody of modern art (stuffed animals with laser eyes or ejaculate splatter paintings à la Jackson Pollock). There is detectable emptiness in what artists like to think are original transgressions. Just like the whole city, the art world is a façade with nothing underneath and because of that it cannot sustain the narrator.

In *The New Me* social relationships are also shown as shallow and disposable. Millie, just like the narrator in *My Year*, has only one friend, Sarah, and the relationship between them is fraught with resentment. Millie has problems finding any employment, whereas Sarah has a relatively stable job. Sarah looks down on Millie, because Millie is privileged – her parents keep on supporting her financially. Millie describes her friendship with Sarah in the following way: “These days, I’m finding our dynamic very boring, and as I walk to the bar to meet her, with all these thoughts on my mind, the past, the present, all the decisions I’ve made, all the decisions that have been made for me, I’m finding it hard to conjure social excitement”. (Butler, 2019, p. 26) Their get-togethers are just an opportunity to take turns talking about themselves. There is no real emotion or authenticity in their relationship and it culminates in a drunken scene in which Millie fantasizes about kicking Sarah out of her apartment and spitting in her face but does not have the courage to do so and carries on with the conversation. So, according to Berardi a natural reaction of an alienated cognitive big city worker would be to turn to work as a source of satisfaction. However, jobs are few and far between and all Millie can find is an endless stream of temporary positions that get her nowhere. These jobs have a serious flaw that prevents Millie from putting all her energies into them. They make no sense.

Pointlessness is a common feature of the jobs the protagonists have in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *The New Me*. The phenomenon of such positions was described by David Graeber in the book titled *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. Graeber gathered testimonials from people who believed their jobs made no sense and were completely useless to humanity. “The consequence of that being the profound moral and spiritual damage to those who do such jobs”. (Graeber, 2018, p. 9) He came up with five categories of bullshit

jobs. Millie and the narrator in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* could be classified as flunkies. In Graeber's taxonomy flunky jobs "exist only or primarily to make someone else look or feel important". (Graeber, 2018, p. 44) In themselves they do not have any value but people higher in the professional hierarchy need them.

The narrator in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is educated in the field of art history and employed as a receptionist at Ducat, an art gallery. This is how she describes her responsibilities at work: "I was the bitch who sat behind a desk and ignored you when you walked into the gallery, a pouty knockout wearing indecipherably cool avant-garde outfits". (Mosfegh, 2018, p. 31) Paradoxically, her job does not involve any real work. She is just supposed to look good at the front desk. When asked about the prices of art work, she is instructed to act stupid and pretend she does not know. So, she spends large chunks of her working day sleeping in a supply closet. When she is finally made redundant the only feeling is regret for the time wasted, "There was no sadness or nostalgia, only disgust that I'd wasted so much time on unnecessary labor when I could have been sleeping and feeling nothing. I'd been stupid to believe that employment would add value to my life". (Mosfegh, 2018, p. 38) It is work that is a meaningless burden, while sleep is constructive and worthwhile. Work as a positive value does not exist in the novel.

Millie in *The New Me* is also a temp receptionist for a designer furniture showroom and just like Mosfegh's protagonist she sees no sense in her work and feels trapped in it: "I'm supposed to answer the phones, but they basically never ring. And I have to paper-clip these papers in this particular way". (Butler, 2019, p. 28) Both of these women occupy the lowest place in the company hierarchy and it seems that the only purpose their jobs serve is to make their superiors look more important. One of the absurdities of Millie's job is that she has to paperclip junk mailers in the correct way because "It's a matter of style," as her coworker says. Most of the time she just spends time surfing the net. In all fairness, whenever (rarely as it happens) there is a real task to be performed, Millie is not very good at it. She seems to be confused when people call Lisa Hopper and has problems putting them through. So, the work is a pain and a source of internal conflict for Millie because she sees through the farce and at the thought of getting a permanent contract at Lisa Hopper has a panic attack in the bathroom. At the same time she is hard pressed for money and does not have the luxury of rejecting it. The hatred for her job manifests itself in her apraxia. The symptomatic acts include forgetting to shred papers given to her, taking sensitive

documents home, coming to work slightly drunk in dirty clothes or leaving unwashed cups on her desk. There is physical discomfort too: Millie sweats, hears ringing in her ears, her arms go numb and her throat tightens. This behaviour is a pretext for Karen, her supervisor to terminate her contract. Truth be told, Karen could answer the phones herself but is afraid that it would make her own job look less important. She fantasizes about becoming an executive assistant one day, taking on “special projects” and organising a party for clients at Lisa Hopper. So, Karen needs someone below her to be higher up on the ladder. David Graeber traces the origin of flunky jobs, like receptionists, in managerial feudalism which loves hierarchy. For managers to feel superior, a group of flunkies is a must. So, because there is a need for hierarchy, jobs like Millie’s or the narrator’s in *My Year* exist, even though they could just as well disappear. “Receptionists are required as a Badge of Seriousness”. (Graeber, 2018 p. 46) Funnily enough, when Millie calculates how much she earns per hour for her actual work she comes to a shocking conclusion: “more than \$2,500 a month to have me, the idiot, sit in a chair, doing about four hours of work a week, sixteen hours of work a month, which puts the rate for my actual services at around \$150 an hour”. (Butler, 2019, p. 33) The pointlessness of these jobs and the depression it causes are the common features of both *The New Me* and *My Year*.

Inwards and out

All the three protagonists share the same coping strategy. In order to survive in the oppressive world they direct their energies inwards. Bartleby’s gradual regression into catatonia takes an extreme form when he ends up in prison. It is there that he severs all bonds with other people, refuses to speak to his employer and starves himself to death. The narrator thinks Bartleby is sleeping huddled next to the prison wall but when he notices his eyes are open, he realizes his former employee is dead. From his biographical perspective Leo Marx identifies the source of Bartleby’s (and Melville’s) failure in his self-absorption and turning his back on mankind. (Marx, 1953, p. 627) Staring at the wall and eventually dying (with his eyes open!) stand for Melville’s engrossment in metaphysical issues that drove him away from humanity. Just like his creator, Bartleby rejects contact with other people, and has to lose. Historicist or Marxist interpretations would seek the source of Bartleby’s sad end in the outside world rather than in himself. Bartleby gets sick because there is something wrong with the world he lives in. The nature of his work alienates him from other people and his social class

determines his fate. Regardless of what makes Bartleby the way he is, his strategy of coping with reality is not sustainable because it excludes other people and this is what leads to his annihilation.

The narrator in *My Way of Rest and Relaxation* chooses sleep as her way out of reality. In contrast to Bartleby, from the outset she assumes her sleeping will end in a year and it is then that she will make a decision whether to kill herself or not: “I knew in my heart [...] that when I’d slept enough, I’d be okay. I’d be renewed, reborn. [...] I could start over without regrets, bolstered by the bliss and serenity that I would have accumulated in my year of rest and relaxation.” (Mosfegh, 2019, p. 39) So, sleep is not passive and meaningless (like her work) but it supposed to bring tangible results: lift her out of her depression and end her misanthropy. The idea of sleep facilitating insight is not new. As Jonathan Crary writes in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*:

“By the mid nineteenth century, the asymmetrical relation between sleep and waking began to be conceptualized in hierarchical models in which sleep was understood as a regression to a lower and more primitive mode in which supposedly higher and more complex brain activity was “inhibited.” Schopenhauer is one of the rare thinkers who turned this hierarchy against itself and proposed that only in sleep could we locate “the true kernel” of human existence”. (Crary, 2013, p. 12)

For the narrator sleep is an activity that is productive and she conceptualizes it similarly to work: “[...] I’d stay home through the blizzard and get some hard sleeping done”. (Mosfegh, 2019, p. 117) Strangely, the lexis she sometimes uses with reference to sleep connotes energy and robustness, for instance, “good, strong American sleep”. (Mosfegh, 2019, p. 157) Sleep assumes a dual nature: a state of not being, *la petite mort*, but at the same time of being active. Her sleeping project reverses stereotypical connotations with sleep and wakefulness which equated sleep with lack of insight or awareness. “Wake up!” is often used as an exclamation directed at those who do not understand the reality. Waking up, then traditionally is understood as recognizing the truth. In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* sleeping is supposed to give answers. The narrator is to come out of this state a transformed person with a new identity and perhaps because of that she is the only nameless character in the novel. The moment of awakening is the end of the revelatory process that takes place when one is asleep. However, asleep cannot last forever – that would mean death. Still, without sleep no answers will be found.

What makes her different from Bartleby and his catatonia is that she plans sleep and expects it to bring some result. In other words, it is instrumentalised, and once the goal has been achieved, sleep can cease. Bartleby gets sucked into his state; he withdraws too much and never comes back.

The sleep in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is unusual because physiologically sleep precludes choice. Sleeping is a natural regenerative activity that one cannot will and it cannot be commodified, which as Crary argues is stealing back time taken from us by capitalism. (Crary, 2013, p. 12) Sleep is, then, anti-capitalist in nature. However, her sleep is of a different kind – it is a commodity. She buys her sleep in two ways. First, it is only possible thanks to medications she purchases. Second, she pays for the time spent sleeping (and not working) with her parents' inheritance money. Without this money, she would not be able to devote time to her project because she would have to work for a living. Interestingly, sleeping emerges as a luxury that only the privileged can afford.

Contrary to the belief that sleep is a solitary activity, it is actually a social undertaking. Undisturbed sleep requires protection both for the defenseless sleeper and for their property. Crary posits that sleep, in fact, fosters social bonds that normally atrophy in capitalism: "Crucial is the dependence on the safekeeping of others for the revivifying carelessness of sleep, for a periodic interval of being free of fears, and for a temporary 'forgetfulness of evil'". (Crary, 2013, p. 25) Here, I will argue, lies the key to understanding the effect of sleep on the narrator. In the final phase of her project, when she resolves that for six months she will wake up every three days for a few hours, she has to solicit the help of Ping Xi who is supposed to act as a custodian, that is, bring her food and keep her safely locked in her apartment. The service is not free of charge, Ping Xi gets permission to turn her sleeping body into a work of art. Initially it looks like a business transaction: they sign a contract, and Ping Xi being first and foremost a stylist and entertainer urges her to perform some over-the-top dramatic gestures like burning her birth certificate, passport and driving license. The narrator refuses, recognizing him as fake and is slightly disgusted but entrusts her safety to him. This is the crucial moment in her sleeping journey although she does not recognize it at that point.

Initially, in her waking hours the narrator just leaves dry requests on post it notes, like: empty the trash bin, cross out the days on the calendar. But one day she adds "thank you," then asks for a candle to burn while bathing, then some flowers. In one of her half conscious states the following thing happens: "And then I felt desperately lonely. So I stuck my arm out

and I grasped onto someone – maybe it was Ping Xi, maybe it was a wakefulness outside myself”. (Mosfeigh, 2019, p. 171) This moment is an epiphany. The narrator reaches out to another person, someone else to relieve the loneliness. At this point, half-dreaming she recognizes she needs other people. Unlike Bartleby, she gets out of her self-absorption and although after this brief moment she returns to sleep, this is when she is saved. When she wakes up, the world is changed: people seem to be friendlier, they assist her when she falls on the floor due to being weak after months of sleeping, nature beckons her. The narrator spends days sitting in the park slowly coming back to the world of living.

Millie copes with her plight also going inwards, not to the degree that Bartleby or the narrator in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* but she numbs herself with alcohol and watching TV series on her laptop (which is also what the protagonist in *My Year* does a lot before she embarks on her venture of full time sleep).

“I’m watching TV on the laptop for company, as usual, and I think about how much I don’t really like TV. Don’t really think of myself as a TV person. I imagine that one day I’ll listen to music while I make dinner, an act that feels very healthy and stable when I think about it, but for now I still need the TV. I know that *Forensic Files* is propaganda for the Justice Department, like all of these crime shows are, and that they instill a weird deference to authority and a childish fear of the other, and that TV in general messes with your perception of time and influences your desires and gives you unattainable expectations for life, but I still can’t make it through the night without it”. (Butler, 2019, p. 16)

This is one of many self-deprecating comments Millie makes about her own ineffective ways of coping with the strains of her life. Being aware that one of the functions of television is manipulation does not change anything though. She still feels compelled to watch for the numbing effect to disengage herself from reality and other people. There is a quality to TV that other drugs don’t have. Jonathan Crary observes that television does not get the viewer high, “This is a decisive trait of the era of technological addictiveness: that one can return again and again to a neutral void that has little affective intensity of any kind”. (Crary, 2013, p. 63) This effect is evident when Millie forces herself to feel sorry for victims of crime in *Forensic Files* but cannot. Sleep chosen as a coping strategy in *My Year* is, in fact,

an extension of watching TV. The mind-numbing effect of TV is simply a milder version of drug induced sleep and sometimes a prelude to sleep before the pill kicks in. It has the same function for Millie: "I'm only half paying attention. Another person with a bad idea about how to get out of an uncomfortable situation. Another attempt at a violent shortcut to a fantasy life. I slip in and out of the narrative until, eventually, sleep overtakes me". (Butler, 2019, p. 39) Plots are immaterial; that is not what the movies or series are watched for. Millie binges on *Forensic Files* with painfully predictable storylines and the narrator in *My Year* watches the same Whoopi Goldberg movies into oblivion. They are used for their desensitizing effect and are supposed to render the viewer comatose in order to numb the pain.

All three characters feel propensity for confined spaces and isolation. Bartleby refuses to leave the office and the protagonist of *My Year* has herself locks in her apartment. Millie also seeks refuge in her rented flat: "Better to be inside, better to be sick like I am now than to be out not accomplishing what I thought I might accomplish" (Butler, 2019, p. 54). Alienating oneself only works as a short-term solution and for the character to be cured they have to leave their confinement and engage with the world. In moments of crisis Millie feels an urge to return home. But she understands home as her past life when she was taken care of and loved by her parents and the world was her oyster. Of course, it is a realm of fantasy, but going there brings comfort. I would argue that Millie is the least alienated of all the three characters. Her saving grace is the affection and gratitude for her parents and regret for ruining a relationship with her boyfriend. She knows that the only way out of a hole are other people and, actually, she has some support network in the form of her retired parents who still care for her and subsidize her rent. Returning to the safety of childhood is impossible but Millie knows what the right course of action should be. When she returns from a visit at her parents' she feels stronger and more confident. When other people are concerned, she often feels guilty for not engaging with them enough. She seems to know intuitively that even though her relationships are unsatisfactory, the cure is still in another person, a fellow sufferer. The only problem being narcissistic self-absorption that she observes in herself and other people that is so difficult to overcome. "If people would just give an inch, I think they would realize that there's conversation to be had here. If there was just some general good cheer directed my way, I could do very well, but maybe everyone was right and I am unfit to go out in public". (Butler, 2019, p. 54) On the face of it, the main problem Millie has is the inability to hold a steady job and the dissatisfaction with the temporary positions.

In reality the dark cloud that hovers over her and renders her unable to act is depression caused by her inability to bond others. Franco Berardi sums up the essence of depression really well in *Precarious Rhapsody*: “What circulates in the sphere of friendship, of love, of social solidarity is what allows us to find sense. Depression can be defined as a lack of sense, as an inability to find sense through action, through communication, through life”. (Berardi, 2009, p. 117) So it is symptomatic that Millie’s depression lifts after she visits her parents and is able to reconnect with them, the narrator in *My Year* when she sits on the park bench feeding squirrels and reaching her hand to touch a person when she is half-asleep whereas Bartleby gives in to his melancholia rejecting all contact and dies.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show the common features of the three texts portraying the protagonists in crisis. The two contemporary novels and the 19th century short story somehow capture the spirit of our times described by Berardi in the following way: “If we look at recent narrative works, we find everywhere the same no-way-out imagination. Art, poetry, narration, music, cinema and the overall aesthetic semiosis of our time are tracing a landscape of imminent darkness: social de-evolution, physical decay and neuro-totalitarianism.” (Berardi, 2015, p. 148) Even though the setting of these texts is approximately a hundred and fifty years apart, they share the strategies their characters use to cope with the reality they find unbearable. Bartleby’s strategy of total withdrawal proves to be ineffective, Millie and the narrator in *My Year* do not give up on other people completely and that is why they may one day be cured. Regardless of the soul-destroying character of work or the dark *zeitgeist*, the solution is always action and connecting with other people.

Bibliography

- Barnett, L. K. (1974). “Bartleby as Alienated Worker”. In: *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 11, no 4.
- Butler, H. (2019). *The New Me*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Berardi, F. (2009). *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-alpha Generation*. London: Minor Compositions.
- Berardi, F. (2015). *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide*. London: Verso.
- Foley, B. (2000). “From Wall Street to Astor Place: Historicizing Melville’s Bartleby”. In: *American Literature*, vol. 72, no 1.

- Crary, J. (2013). *24/:Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London: Verso.
- Deleuze, G. (1998). Bartleby; or, The Formula. In: *Essays Critical and Clinical*. London: Verso.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Fredrickson, B. Roberts, T.-A. (1997), "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks". In: *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, no 21.
- Graeber, D. (2018). *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. New York: Simon&Schuster.
- Marx, L. (1953). "Melville's Parable of the Walls". In: *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 61, no 4.
- Melville, H. (2009). *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
- Mosfegh, O. (2018). *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Reed, N. (2004). "The Specter of Wall Street: "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and the Language of Commodities". In: *American Literature*, vol. 76, no 2.
- West, R. (2019). Bartleby's Consensual Dysphoria. In: S. Levmore, M. C. Nussbaum (eds.). *Power Prose and Purse: Law, Literature and Economic Transformations*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Malina Zatużna-Luczkiwicz, M.A. in English Philology – a faculty member of the English and American Studies Department (The University College of Applied Sciences in Chełm, Poland).

E-mail: mzaluzna@op.pl