



# “But the Cold World Shall Not Know”: A Reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Julian and Maddalo” as a Detective Story

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**Abstract.** This essay offers a reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Julian and Maddalo” as a metacognitive mystery tale that asks important questions about the possibility and reliability of knowledge when the roles of detective, criminal, and victim are gradually interwoven.

The metaphysical detective story is a literary genre characterized by “the profound questions that it raises about narrative, interpretation, subjectivity, the nature of reality, and the limits of knowledge” (Merivale and Sweeney 1). Several critics (most notably Merivale, Sweeney, and Dechêne) have worked their way back to Edgar Allan Poe and the origins of detective fiction to explore mysteries that undermine the sleuth’s ability to interpret and produce reliable knowledge. A story such as “The Man of the Crowd” (1840), for example, presents an enigma that “does not permit itself to be read” (Poe 475). The “unreadability” of the story lies not in the narrative quality of the text but in the story being told by a convalescent and unreliable narrator about an inscrutable old man supposed to be the “genius of deep crime” (Poe 481). The pursuit of this stranger ends inconclusively. The story also subverts the roles of detective, victim, and criminal, blending them together in the characters of two madmen mirroring each other’s behavior.

Before Poe, there are few tales of unsolvable mysteries. One is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Wakefield” (1835), the story of a man who willfully leaves his wife and family to spy upon

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them from nearby only to return to the household after 20 years as if nothing had happened and without, for that matter, offering any explanation for his behavior. Examples are even harder to find in the eighteenth century. Many critics have acknowledged Voltaire's *Zadig* (1747) as a precursor tale of detection. If, however, the multiple adventures of *Zadig* come close to turning him, like *Wakefield*, into "the Outcast of the Universe" (Hawthorne 140), they eventually make him a king, thereby providing resolution to the story. Voltaire's tale has an interesting philosophical approach to the themes of chance and destiny, dwelling at length upon the protagonist's reasoning capacities—what Poe would later call *ratiocination*. It also anticipates many characteristics of the detective story as developed and systematized by Poe in his C. Auguste Dupin trilogy and then by Émile Gaboriau, Arthur Conan Doyle, G. K. Chesterton, and their followers. Such stories established the conventions of the traditional whodunit but are far from the unfulfilled quests for answers that can be found in the metaphysical branch of the genre.

If the term *metaphysical* was first used to refer to Chesterton's Father Brown tales (Haycraft 76), it was soon adopted to describe detective stories without solution or resolution, in which the roles of detective, victim, and criminal are intermingled, and in which a crime might not even have occurred. Chance is the driving force of such narratives. Using the less-ambiguous term *metacognitive* accounts for the problem of knowledge (rather than teleological belief or faith) that pervades these mysteries (Dechéne). For the purposes of this article, the key point to recognize is that the metacognitive dimension of texts such as "The Man of the Crowd" or "Wakefield" resides in their ability to question the possibility of indisputable knowledge while alluding to the idea that meaning is a human construct, whose flaws and profound gaps can best be described through the concept of the sublime.

## A METACOGNITIVE POEM

In this context, Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Julian and Maddalo" can be read as a proto-detective story or at least as a mystery tale written in verse and characterized by many of the themes and narrative tropes proper to metacognitive investigations. Published in 1824, "Julian and Maddalo" is a poetical and philosophical dialogue that addresses issues relating to the construction of identity and knowledge, and that explores the porous border between madness and romantic love. No comforting resolution here. The dilemma at the center of the poem takes on sublime connotations as it presents a mystery that completely shatters the protagonists' conception of reality, as well as their faith in humanity's free will, marking "the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits" (Shaw 2). This "beyond" soon comes to obsess Julian, becoming the object of his unachievable quest.

In his introduction to the poem, Shelley presents the three main characters of the story. Count Maddalo, a Venetian nobleman, is intelligent and proud but also highly sensitive to the limits and failures of mankind. He personifies "an intense apprehension of the nothingness of human life." Julian, the story's narrator, is an Englishman who strongly believes in "those philosophical notions which assert the power of man over his own mind" (Shelley 120). Shelley also insists that Julian's conviction of the capability of man to do good is not metaphysical, since Julian is also seriously anti-religious. Finally, no information is given about the maniac apart from the fact that he has been "disappointed in love" (Shelley 121) and that he is now shut off from the world in a madhouse. As in Herman

Melville's "Bartleby," no biographical material is provided to help the protagonists or readers grasp the alien personality of the figure in whose heart lies the mystery.

The story takes place in Venice and can easily be divided into three chronological sections: (1) the dialogue between Julian and Maddalo; (2) the maniac's monologue; and (3) the end of the debate between the two men and, in the epilogue, the conversation between Julian and Maddalo's grown-up daughter. Many critics have debated the identities of Julian and Maddalo and have come to a rather logical conclusion: Maddalo is, in fact, the romantic poet, Lord Byron, author of *Don Juan* and close friend of Shelley; Shelley, in turn, can be identified as Julian. The maniac, however, is less easily identifiable, and there has been much speculation as to whether he represents Shelley, Byron, or even a mix of the two poets (see Saveson).

Regardless of who the protagonists represent, their philosophical conversation works as a dialectical device through which Shelley can contrast divergent points of view "about the power of human will to realize good" (Brown 40). Julian embodies the optimist, whereas Maddalo represents the pessimist; in the words of James Hill, Julian plays the part of "the passionate Romantic idealist," whereas Maddalo is the perfect image of the "[r]omantic cynic" (86). The whole poem revolves around a debate between the two men. Julian advocates human free will, whereas Maddalo is far more skeptical. His "darker side" (line 49) resides in his acknowledgment of humanity's limits and "the inherent frailty of human nature" (Brown 42). Of course, this debate bears a certain resemblance to the endless conversations between detectives and their sidekicks, the most emblematic examples being Poe's Dupin and his admiring friend-narrator, as well as Conan Doyle's Holmes and Watson. In this case, however, Julian ("Watson") is much less credulous, confronting his mentor and even becoming, if not the main detective of the story, the most emotionally involved in the case.

The debate takes a more serious turn when the count offers to prove his point by visiting a man whose impossible aspirations have driven him crazy: "We'll visit him, and his wild talk will show / How vain are such aspiring theories" (200–201). Julian nonetheless stands by his beliefs, wanting to use the opportunity to "prove the induction otherwise" and to demonstrate that a "soul of goodness" can be found in every wrecked being (204). He believes that individuals can find the strength to escape from their misery: "this is not destiny / But man's own willful ill" (210–11). On the way, Maddalo tells his companion the few facts that he knows about the man that they are going to meet: he used to be wealthy and confident; a true idealist who was deceived by "[t]he excellent impostors of this Earth / When they outface detection" (242–43). He also suffered deeply from an unhappy love affair and, driven mad with despair, was brought by the police to the asylum.<sup>1</sup>

The poor man's pain has now turned into his shadow; the suffering is so permanent and close that it is tainted with nearly abject connotations: "there was no joy in error / But pain and insult and unrest and terror" (326–27). The maniac is indeed experiencing "a kind of *narcissistic crisis*" in which "the abject is the violence of mourning for an 'object' that has always already been lost" (Kristeva 14–15; emphasis in original). He is anguished by the thought that his relationship might have been insincere and inauthentic, and that the shared years with his beloved might, in fact, have been a veil covering extreme solitude.

The maniac's passion can be explained by the image of love held by Shelley. As Floyd Stovall contends, love, for the poet, was "the supreme spirit and sole productive source of good in the life of the world" (283). The notion of love appears as the touchstone of Shelley's life philosophy. Strikingly, the penitent seems to imply that, no matter how important love

might be, it can also be deceitful, leading those who are not wary into the most desperate situations. Although Shelley, like Julian, was “convinced of the inherent goodness of man... confidently hop[ing] that humanity would purge itself of the disease of evil, and eventually attain a state approximating perfection” (Stovall 295), the maniac’s story highlights the inherent difficulty (if not impossibility) of such a task. In other words, the claim that love is not truth and that only truth can bring peace of mind seems to conform to Maddalo’s idea that “passive acceptance” is “both a practical and logical solution to human problems” (Hill 89).

Thus, the maniac’s insanity finds its source in the empty promises of love. This realization burns like a “pale Hell / Within [him]” (351–52), turning the maniac into another Bartleby, whose deep knowledge of human nature, including its painful finitude, isolates him from the rest of society and condemns him to a “living death of agonies” (415). Here, knowledge stands out as a degenerative force driving those who allegedly possess it into madness and death. Like many metacognitive detectives who dream of finding perfect answers to their questions, it is the seeker’s idealism that causes his downfall. On the whole, as Hill summarizes, it is the “expectation of earthly perfection” that leads to madness:

[F]or the universal order lies beyond human and earthly apprehension, and may only be approached by an intuitive act, reaching beyond the particular instance to the pattern of which it is part. The beginning of madness is the proud hope that another human being can perfectly apprehend the true nature of the self and respond to it with absolute, and therefore, inhuman, love. (90)

As such, the maniac, like Bartleby, can be seen as a “visionary” (Hill 91) who is treated like a criminal because his visions are either misunderstood or simply unrealizable in the real world. If these characters have access to a higher cognitive dimension, it is due to their hypersensitivity, which today could be described as a form of “sensory processing sensitivity”: “a genetically determined trait involving a deeper ... cognitive processing of stimuli that is driven by higher emotional reactivity” (Aron et al. 262). The madman acknowledges this excess of sensitivity in front of his visitors:

*me ...*  
Who loved and pitied all things, and could moan  
For woes which others hear not, and could see  
The absent with the glance of phantasy,  
And with the poor and trampled sit and weep,  
Following the captive to his dungeon deep;  
*Me*—who am as a nerve o’er which do creep  
The else unfelt oppressions of this earth. (442–51; emphasis in original)

In this passage, the maniac emphasizes his acute awareness of mankind’s flaws as well as his incapacity to look the other way. As Brown puts it, this psychological self-portrait “suggests a congenital sensitivity that makes suffering unavoidable” (44). This responsiveness is the source of the maniac’s cognitive and poetical insights, reflecting Baudelaire’s understanding of inspiration as a “convulsion” or “nervous shock” triggered by sublime thoughts or experiences (8). In the poem, the feeling of the sublime is engendered by the maniac’s intimation of the limits of love and thus of his own shortcomings that, he dreads, he will never be able to remedy. All he can do, he thinks, is show that he still has the will and strength to endure his alienation as well as the perils that may lie ahead: “I live to shew / How much men bear and die not” (458–59). The maniac illustrates the idea “that even in abject misery a man is capable of at least some exercise of will for moral ends.”

This reaction nuances Maddalo's skepticism without, however, proving him totally wrong and, even less, proving Julian's "naïve assumptions about the boundless power of the human will" (Brown 44). The maniac's figure incarnates, in this perspective, not a "sheer opposition, but...a synthesis" (Brown 45) of the two friends' arguments. He represents mankind's misery but also asserts, to a certain extent, the power of the human will to achieve good.

## THE LANGUAGE OF MADNESS

The madman embodies the roles of both victim and criminal. For the two detectives, he is also the solution to the mystery they have created. He is Dupin's orangutan, Holmes's Irene Adler: the only possible explanation. Yet, the deceived lover, like Poe's "genius of deep crime," remains elusive. Julian and Maddalo leave the asylum, unable to resolve their original argument. The two friends feel, however, that they have learned something from their encounter and that is that there is poetry in madness:

The colours of his mind seemed yet unworn;  
For the wild language of his grief was high,  
Such as in measure were called poetry (540–42)

The poetical tongue is the language of the mad and the social outcast. In *Bartleby's* mouth, it is silence; in "Julian and Maddalo," it is a lament for the lost loved one. This language does not give access to indisputable truths, but it nonetheless seems to open the doors to a different perception of reality. Maddalo is the one who best grasps this when he concludes:

Most wretched men  
Are cradled into poetry by wrong,  
They learn in suffering what they teach in song. (544–46)

Such an insight finds its origins in Maddalo's capacity to relate to the maniac and even, to a certain extent, to identify with him. The count was indeed the only person to help him when he was arrested:

[S]o I fitted up for him  
Those rooms beside the sea, to please his whim  
...  
A stranger could do little more or less  
For one so gentle and unfortunate (252–58)

In contrast, Julian does nothing to alleviate the man's condition besides acknowledging his moving poetical sadness. Maddalo's name also suggests a possible affinity between himself and the maniac, in his understanding of the mad in an uncommon and open-minded manner. The main issue, as it were, might be to identify whether Julian or Maddalo is the one most likely to grasp and accept the madman's assertions about human nature.

Brown argues that Julian's point of view eventually prevails, the whole skeptical poem tending toward a positive resolution that "maximizes man's power for moral assertion" (47). In contrast, a reading of Shelley's text as a metacognitive mystery tale reveals the importance of Maddalo's perspective without bringing a clear solution to the mystery. If it is true that the maniac can be more positively apprehended as a synthesis of the two men's arguments rather than as the emblem of an irreconcilable tension between opposites, the only one who seems to be truly aware of the maniac's cognitive acumen is Maddalo.

This idea is reinforced when Julian claims that Maddalo has the ability, through his “subtle talk,” to “make [one] know [oneself]” (560–61).

Julian, however, never really seems to benefit from his friend’s experience. Although he imagines himself “studying” the maniac closely enough to find “[a]n entrance to the caverns of his mind” (573), bringing him out of his despair and ultimately turning him into a close friend, he does not accomplish anything of the kind:

and this was all  
Accomplished not; such dreams of baseless good  
Oft come and go in crowds and solitude  
And leave no trace (577–80)

Like the lawyer in “Bartleby,” Julian ends up abandoning the man for whom he arguably felt so much compassion. He even returns to London, leaving his good intentions behind. In his fascination for the madman, there also is a perverse curiosity that, if it never really leaves him, is silenced by the false excuse that nothing can be done for the captive in any case.

In that sense, Julian’s behavior proves to be much more cynical than his statements. Like Melville’s narrator, he wants to convince himself that “no man ... ever committed a diabolical murder for sweet charity’s sake” (Melville 41), and, like the attorney, he misses the opportunity to make up for his lack of personal involvement. His self-interest never really prompts him “to charity and philanthropy” (Melville 41) but rather convinces him that he has done his best and that he can now walk away. Furthermore, these stories seem to suggest that the narrators’ curiosity and desire to help worsen matters for the people that they are trying to assist. As Beckett’s Molloy ironically states: “Against the charitable gesture there is no defence” (19). The detective-narrators are indeed those who contribute to the diagnoses of madmen as madmen. If Melville’s lawyer and Julian first appear able to grasp Bartleby’s and the maniac’s hypersensitivity and cognitive skills, they nevertheless end up confirming society’s view of the men as lunatics. It is the easiest solution; the simplest way to reinforce their own “normality.”

Yet madness is not a category that can be defined so readily. The dialectic between the concepts of madness, reason and unreason, is based on the mutually exclusive definitions of these terms when these concepts should, in fact, be apprehended as categories so closely interrelated that they are nearly interchangeable. As Michel Foucault explains: “The madness of madness is to be secretly reason. And that non-madness, as the content of madness, is the second essential point that must be made about unreason. Unreason is that the truth of madness is reason” (206). As a metacognitive sleuth, Julian never reaches such a subtle understanding of the maniac nor of human nature as a whole. He nonetheless remains deeply troubled by the case. In the poem’s epilogue, he returns to Venice after many years, still haunted by the story of the madman. Maddalo is traveling abroad, but his daughter is there to welcome him. Julian cannot help asking her about the maniac’s fate. The woman is well acquainted with the story and announces that the man died two years after Julian’s departure. She remembers that the madman’s lover visited him shortly before that but left once more, never to be seen again.

## THE CHILD, THE MADMAN, AND THE POET

Instead of reaching a comforting and cathartic resolution, the maniac’s mystery concludes with his death and the detective’s unfulfilled desire to satisfy his curiosity. “How

did it end?” asks Julian with anguish (607). He desperately wants to know the story of the couple’s relationship and the reasons behind their separation: “*why* they parted, *how* they met” (610, emphasis in original). The detective is eager to fill in the years that he has left in silence and starts a real interrogation:

I urged and questioned still, she told me how  
All happened—but the cold world shall not know. (616–17)

Many critics have stumbled upon these final lines, whose provocative inconclusiveness clearly mirrors the endings of some of the most emblematic metacognitive mystery tales. Yet the confession of Maddalo’s daughter to the detective differs from that in a story such as Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” or Henry James’s “The Figure in the Carpet” in which the investigating protagonists are left alone facing their doubts, never receiving a final explanation from the people they stalk or interrogate.

Although it is impossible to know if Julian actually solves the mystery, the great difference between Shelley’s poem and the other stories previously mentioned is that the detective figure does not apparently share the reader’s ignorance. This egotistical twist seems all the more frustrating for readers who have to cope with the idea that they are the only ones who cannot have access to knowledge. It all turns out, in the end, as if James’s literary critic finally discovers the “buried treasure” (285) but decided never to reveal its location. In that sense, the readers are the only remaining metacognitive detectives condemned to read the story over and over again in search of a clue that they know is nowhere to be found. What is more, the readers’ dismissal points to the selfish interest that urged Julian to investigate in the first place. Other than his plea in defense of the madman’s heartbreaking situation and his insistence that he has been personally touched by his lamentation, there is no evidence that the narrator cares about the maniac at all. Indeed, unlike Maddalo, Julian does nothing to help the man. He only visits him once, and his return to Venice is too late for the maniac. But arguably, Julian’s goal was not to prevent crime or injustice, nor to help a potential victim, but to confirm his own vision of human nature. It is as if Dupin had found that the culprit was an orangutan but was not concerned with finding its master to confirm his conclusion.

From this perspective, Julian does not appear as a concerned detective but as a man who wants to convince himself that he has the free will to solve any problem and do good under any circumstances. Unlike Maddalo who uses the madman to “demonstrate the futility of human perfectability” (Marshall 136), Julian values the experience as a vehicle to his own “perfectability.” According to this reading, Julian sees the madman as a possible gateway to higher spiritual and moral knowledge, an approach that is reminiscent of Foucault’s connection between madness and reason:

There is in madness an essential aptitude for mimicking reason, which in the end masks its own unreasonable content; or rather, the wisdom of nature is so profound that it manages to use madness as another path for reason, making it a short-cut to wisdom, avoiding its own forms with an invisible prescience.... The nature of madness is also at the same time its useful wisdom; its *raison d’être* is to approach reason so closely, and be consubstantial with it so that the two form an indissoluble text. (176–77)

This paradox is precisely what “Julian and Maddalo” is about. Indeed, what else have the two detectives done other than use the maniac as “another path for reason” that would guide them to “wisdom”? This passage epitomizes the inseparable nature of madness and reason, just like Maddalo and Julian. This is why the poem cannot provide a cathartic resolution: it simply cannot “decide between optimism and pessimism about man’s potential

for good” (Brown 47). Underlying this fundamental doubt is also the question that lies behind all metacognitive investigations, namely: is knowledge rationally achievable or is it always sublimely out of reach?

According to Foucault, the *raison d'être* of madness is to blur the boundary between reason and unreason, between the sane and the insane, the detective and the criminal, in a way that ultimately provides an image of human nature as an “indissoluble text”; that is, as a mystery that “does not permit itself to be read” (Poe 475). A difference remains, however, between works such as “The Man of the Crowd” and “Bartleby” versus “The Figure in the Carpet” and “Julian and Maddalo”: in the Poe and Melville stories, no one claims to know anything, whereas in the James and Shelley works, an epiphany seems to have been reached but will not be shared. Why does Julian/Shelley not bestow his knowledge on the “cold world”? And why is the world so “cold”? Is this a way for the poet to assert that not everyone is worthy or able to bear such knowledge, implying, like Corvick, that the figure is not for the “common man” to find: “It isn’t for the vulgar—it isn’t for the vulgar!” (James 287). Is the world too rational or too obtuse to have access to this revelation? Would its disclosure make the world better or “colder”? Is Julian keeping the secret in his own interest, or is he trying to preserve the rest of humanity from a truth potentially so terrible and bleak that it would be of no use apart from destroying everyone’s hope?

Although these questions are hardly answerable, two things remain: first, it is not a coincidence that the source of final knowledge happens to be Maddalo’s daughter, a woman recalling her memories as a child and telling her story with the infinite “newness” and originality that Baudelaire assigns to the “genius of childhood” (19). The narrator himself already sensed this when he described the girl’s eyes as “[t]win mirrors of Italian Heaven, yet gleam[ing] / with such deep meaning” (148–49). The child and the madman—and perhaps between the two, the poet—share the capacity to create new perspectives on reality. As Wolfgang Kayser observes, “From an early date, insanity, quasi-insanity, and dreams were used to define the source of creativity” (184). In most metacognitive mystery tales, however, these creative powers are too sublime to be mastered and transmitted. Besides, they also convey true feelings of danger and terror. This is the second point that needs to be addressed: why do nearly all the characters that encounter an immense source of knowledge and joy eventually die? In different but related ways, the maniac, Bartleby, as well as Corvick, Vereker and Gwendolen in James’s tale all end up dead because they seem to know something to which the “cold world” cannot have access.

On the whole, whether the protagonists manage to glimpse the thing they are looking for or whether they fail grotesquely, the outcome of their existential investigations seems to be sublime in the sense that it is “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (Burke 39), transforming the quests for knowledge into “unreadable” texts. In this way, “Julian and Maddalo” appears as an early metacognitive mystery tale in which a detective-poet,<sup>2</sup> wandering “[a]mid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world,” is suddenly ready to take the “fearful risk of losing his place forever” (Hawthorne 140) by asking what one can truly know.

*Keywords:* madness; Melville, Herman; metacognitive/metaphysical detective story; Shelley, Percy Bysshe; sublime

## NOTES

1. The maniac's incarceration offers an interesting echo of Bartleby's story: the poor scrivener sequestered in the Tombs—the name given to the “Manhattan Detention Complex” at the time—away from a society that simply could not cope with him.
2. The figure of the detective-poet also is reminiscent of Gabriel Syme, “the poet of law” and order in Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (3).

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