

Received 27/05/2021

Published 31/12/2021

Dead No Longer: The Revival of the Subject in Paul Auster's Contemporary Novel *Man in the Dark*

Faiza Fatma Zohra HADJI¹

¹ Ali Lounici, Blida 2

Abstract

In a traditional sense, subjectivity in literature is the equivalent of creating the protagonist's psychological realm. On the one hand, Realist authors favor the creation of round characters that are considered a mirror to reality. On the other hand, the modernists use language as a structure through which they depict a character's inner world. However, the postmodern consensus negates such conceptualizations of a humanistic subject. Indeed, postmodern literary production, informed by poststructuralist critiques such as Derrida and Barthes, believe in the de-centered subject and the death of the author. In line with their oppositional stance against all monolithic human constructs, namely Essentialism and Universalism, Postmodern authors create anti-humanist subjects. That is to say, the human as character is no longer the center of a work of art. The contemporary scene, however, is frustrated with the postmodern perspective on subjectivity and strives to re-humanize the subject in literature. As Quentin Kraft points out, in the postmodern quest to deconstruct all dogmatic views of the world, it has robbed the individual of all constructive tools, including those used to create a meaningful sense of self. In her study of the contemporary endeavor to forge a new sense of self beyond postmodern thought, Nicole Timmer diagnoses three main issues faced by characters on such a quest. For one, the central characters in the novels she analyzes face a paralysis of choice, in that, they are unable to choose a particular identity in a world that presents them with a myriad of possible personalities. Furthermore, these characters are incapable of naming and appropriating their feelings, despite feeling them. Consequently, these characters are in need of human connection, in order to gain understanding of their feelings. Thus, this paper proposes to read Paul Auster's novel *Man in the Dark* in light of Timmer's main questions, how does the novel's main character choose an identity from those he is presented with? How is he able to make sense of his feelings? And how can he relate or connect to others?

Key words: Subjectivity; Self; Postmodernism; Contemporary Literature

1. Introduction

The notion of the subject has gone through various conceptual changes in literary works, mainly as a reflection of the ideology of the times. As such, the self in realist and modernist literature is portrayed through a focus on an individual's psyche, albeit from different perspectives. While the realist subject is presented as possessing of a round character, the

modernist view on selfhood depicts a character's inner world. However, postmodern thought came to negate all traditional beliefs on the self that are informed by Essentialism and Universalism which brought the de-centered subject to the fore. Contemporary authors and critics, though, feel that such a view on selfhood strips the individual of all possibilities to make sense of himself and the world around him. Thus, this paper proposes to read Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* (2008) in the light of Nicole Timmer's (2010) study on the contemporary project to re-humanize the subject. Therefore, it will analyze the protagonist's struggle for identity while trying to make sound choices, confront difficult emotions and build meaningful connections.

2. Background

The issue of selfhood has been a major concern in philosophy and literature, from ancient Greece to the contemporary scene. Following Aristotle's views on the mimetic nature of art, realist authors depict fictional subjects that adhere to the rules of mimesis. In this sense, the well-made novel seeks to represent round characters that mirror real life figures. Bennett and Royle (2004) name plausibility, complexity and unity as the three main characteristics of the 19th century literary character. That is to say, these characters must appear, behave and speak in a manner that is close to those of real individuals. Accordingly, they must possess coherent identities that are nonetheless paradoxical at times (p. 62). However, realist portrayal of the fictional subject has been criticized, on account of its propagation of the illusion of a unified knowable human subject.

If realist authors' characters are a faithful reflection of their reality, modernists create subjects through whom reality was to be perceived and apprehended. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the socio-cultural milieu helped foster the ideals of humanism in literature. For instance, the scientific revolution fostered the belief in the human's ability to generate reasoned explanations for worldly phenomena. Furthermore, philosophers such as Kant and Descartes viewed the individual's capacity to reason as an essential and universal part of man. Such conceptualizations of personhood are reflected in modernist works that place the human subject at their center. Accordingly, modernist literature focuses on characters' inner world to construct their identities and the world around them. Narrative techniques such as stream of consciousness and interior monologue facilitate the author's task in exploring the modernist notion of the self. However, postmodern authors negate all conventional representations of the subject, as they dispense with the idea of the individual as a unified whole that can be placed at the center of a literary work.

Postmodern literary production, informed by poststructuralist critics such as Derrida and Foucault, believe in the de-centered subject and the death of man. The idea that the individual is a rational meaning maker is viewed as another grand narrative that must be opposed by poststructuralist and postmodernists alike. In line with their oppositional stance against all monolithic human constructs, namely Essentialism and Universalism, postmodern authors create anti-humanist subjects. Accordingly, the postmodern subject has no origin or purpose, his actions are inconsistent and a spur of the moment. As such, the postmodern fictional character is unable to delineate reasoned explanations or motivation for his actions and is often unable to execute them. Furthermore, the postmodern self is solipsistic and cannot build meaningful connections with others. The contemporary scene, however, is frustrated with the postmodern perspective on subjectivity and strives to re-humanize the subject in literature.

Quentin Kraft (1996) asserts that, in the postmodern quest to deconstruct all dogmatic views of the world, it has robbed the individual of all constructive tools, including those used to create a meaningful sense of self (p. 238). Therefore, contemporary authors feel an overwhelming need to make sense of the story of the self, its actions and its relation to others. In her study of the contemporary endeavor to forge a new sense of self beyond postmodern thought, Nicole Timmer (2010) senses a need to construct a coherent self narrative (p. 40). Furthermore, Calvin O. Schrag (1996) sees that in stark contrast to the postmodern man, the contemporary individual is consistent in his actions, keeps his promises and delivers on future plans (p. 64). Both these critics agree on the vital role a community plays in self creation, in so far as an individual makes sense of itself and the world through its interaction with others. There is a wide consensus among critics as well as authors that the postmodern notion of the self, while it may have reflected the postmodern zeitgeist, no longer represents the contemporary subject.

Paul Auster is an acclaimed contemporary author, who is known for using postmodern techniques which have been widely researched, especially in his earlier works. However, his recent novels have seen a move beyond postmodern sensibilities. *Man in the Dark* (Auster, 2008), specifically, shows this shift in putting an end to meta-narrative, in order to focus on 'real' and meaningful stories. In *Literature after Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies*, Huber (2014) focuses on the importance of narrative and its communicative qualities that *Man in the Dark* depicts. However, she does not delve deeply into how the novel explores the notion of identity as part of its break with postmodern aesthetic.

3. Re-humanizing the Subject after Postmodernism

This paper will draw on Nicole Timmer's book length study *Do You Feel it Too?* (2010) to analyze the concept of selfhood in Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* (2008). Timmer advances that contemporary novels seek to re-humanize the subject after its proclaimed demise by postmodern thought. Timmer (2010) believes that the postmodern socio-cultural sphere, in so far as the self is viewed and portrayed, inhibits the individual from constructing a "meaningful sense of self" (p. 301). From her analysis, she diagnoses three major issues faced by contemporary characters in their quest for selfhood, in the backdrop of postmodern culture. Primarily, the individual is expected to construct an autonomous and self sufficient identity, but is not granted explicitly set rules in the matter. While the postmodern culture takes pride in the liberties it affords the self, it paradoxically plagues it with a sense of failure and leaves it in need of guidance. In addition, these characters are unable to make sense of their feelings, which is symptomatic of a postmodern culture that approaches sentiments with a sense of detachment and irony. The contemporary character, therefore, is overwhelmed with feelings it cannot name or embrace. Furthermore, these persons are isolated and trapped in their own minds which leaves them in need to create meaningful connections. As such, Timmer points to the solutions to these issues proposed by contemporary authors so as to revive the subject in literature.

4. The Contemporary Character's Lack of Agency

In a culture that expects the individual to make choices that would lead to an independent personality, the protagonist of Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* (2008) struggles to make the right decisions. One of his biggest mistakes is made at a young age, when he destroys his marriage by cheating on his wife, he attributes the issue to a feeling of disconnection from who he is, as if his deeds do not matter:

"I'm talking about my mind, my mental makeup. [...] I walked around with a feeling that my life has never truly belonged to me, that I had never truly inhabited myself, that I had never been real. And because I wasn't real, I didn't understand the effect I had on others [...] the hurt I could inflict on the people who loved me" (Auster, 2008, p. 234)

Furthermore, the protagonist, August Brill, is an old man confined to a wheelchair unable to be the father and the grandfather he longs to be. While he wants to comfort his granddaughter Katya's sleepless mind he laments: "but I can't climb the stairs in a wheelchair, can i?"

(Auster, 2008, p. 21). In addition to his physical impairment, he is psychologically distressed and is unable to write the memoir he promised his daughter he would write: “the family history, a chronicle of a vanished world” (Auster, 2008, p. 22). He would rather watch movies with Katya instead: “feeling [his] mind grow numb from all the endless parade of images dancing across the screen” (Auster, 2008, p. 22). He attributes his loss of motivation to write a self narrative to his feelings of loneliness and indifference after the death of his wife: “after seventy-two years on this earth, who [cares] if I write about myself or not?” (Auster, 2008, p. 21). As a way to escape his story and his responsibilities towards his family, he sits alone in the dark of the night and imagines the story of someone who is stuck in a civil war in America: “that’s what I do when sleep refuses to come. I lie in bed and tell myself stories.”(Auster, 2008, p. 5) “As long as I am inside them, they prevent me from thinking about things I would prefer to forget” (Auster, 2008, p. 6). The main plot of August Brill’s story is that its protagonist is ordered to kill him, so as to stop the civil war he is imagining into existence, which might be indicative of his depressive and suicidal state of mind. Moreover, he could be displacing feelings of guilt from his own mistakes to an imagined story in which he is responsible for so much devastation and deserves death: “because he invented the war. Eliminate that head, and the war stops.” (Auster, 2008, p. 17)

Not only is the protagonist lonely in his struggle, so is his daughter and granddaughter, each with their own woes: “my daughter and granddaughter are asleep in their bedrooms, each one alone as well” (Auster, 2008, p. 4) While his daughter Miriam battles the loneliness of her divorce, his granddaughter Katya is grieving the death of her partner. He has one of the characters in his story describe them as “a house of grieving, wounded souls.” (Auster, 2008, p. 108). In order to cope with her sorrow, his granddaughter starts to watch movies. While August at first sees it as a good sign he later thinks of it as: “A form of self-medication, a homeopathic drug to anesthetize herself against the need to think about her future.” (Auster, 2008, p. 25) Similar to her Grandfather she shows signs of depression, such as self medication, the lack of engagement in the present and no future plans, she is: “unmoving for hours on end, refusing to stir herself even to pick up the phone, showing little to no signs of life” (Auster, 2008, p. 26)

Similarly, his daughter avoids her problems by writing Rose Hawthorne’s biography: “a woman who floundered through the world [...] a truculent and difficult person, a confessed “stranger to herself”” (Auster, 2008, p. 69) an aimless woman who did not know what she wanted in life. He guesses that the reason behind his daughter’s attraction to Rose’s story is

that Rose stirs her life in a positive direction later on. Miriam was driven by “a fundamental conviction that people have the power to change.” (Auster, 2008, p. 71) However, that is not the case in her own life, as her marriage has been over for five years and she is yet to move on. She disappears into her work: “all her energy has gone into her teaching and writing.” (Auster, 2008, p. 71) While the loneliness and the shadow of that failed marriage haunt her: “I need you [dad]. I'm so lonely in that house. [...] I need someone to hold me every once in a while and tell me that I'm not an awful person.” (Auster, 2008, p. 159) Brill figures that her ex-husband called her an ‘awful person’ and she took it as: “some ultimate judgment of her character, a condemnation of who and what she is.” (Auster, 2008, p. 159)

Even though all the characters in the novel try to escape their lives and emotions at all costs in the beginning, they do show some measure of engagement. As Katya and her grandfather watch those movies they analyze some tropes used, they discuss the symbolism behind certain objects that are a reflection of real human emotions. Her theory is that movies use: “inanimate objects as a means of expressing human emotions.” (Auster, 2008, p. 27) However, when August suggests they talk about the death of her partner she refuses to engage “stop it, grandpa. I don't want to talk about him. Some other time, maybe, but not now.” (Auster, 2008, p. 30) Later when he brings up watching movies less because he views them as a form of self medication, she says: “I can't do that. I need the images. I need the distraction.” (Auster, 2008, p. 253) furthermore, he has the same attitude towards his memories about his late wife: “I don't want to think about Sonia... stick to the story. That's the only solution.” (Auster, 2008, p. 36) These characters cannot make sense of who they are as they are stunned into inaction in a world that demands they face its struggles alone. Nonetheless, they gain agency not through facing their problems but through sharing feelings with other individuals. Although their ways are still escapist, they suggest an attempt to reflect upon human suffering and make sense of it, even if it is not their own.

5. Embracing Human Emotion: A Break with Meta-narrative and a Return to the ‘Real’

According to Timmer, our emotions are strongly tied to our life stories and narrative of the self. A return to self narrative and the emotions linked to it in the novel is done through an interruption of the war story, told as meta-narrative, and a recounting of the narrator's ‘real stories’ of war and violence that he was witness to, or were told to him. This is what Timmer (2010) views as a break with the ‘textualist model’ and its preoccupation with meta-narrative, for a turn towards realistic accounts in the form of traumatic experiences repressed by

postmodernism (p. 325). While August Brill at first embraces the postmodern technique of meta-narrative and multiple worlds theory: “There are many worlds, and they all run parallel to one another [...] each world imagined or written by someone in another world” (Auster, 2008, p. 105) he cannot help but recollect some personal experiences: “Brick [the protagonist of his story] is still with me [...] but how to stop the mind from charging off wherever it wants to go?” (Auster, 2008, p. 134) For instance, he witnessed one of the race riots of the 60s in America and describes the atrocities of the event, the people killed, injured and arrested: “that was my war. Not a real war perhaps, but once you witness violence on that scale, it isn’t difficult to imagine something worse.” (Auster, 2008, p. 126) In addition, he narrates stories he heard from distant relatives and friends about the Second World War: “War stories. Let your guard down for a moment, and they come rushing in on you, one by one...” (Auster, 2008, p. 181) As a final act of rebellion against postmodern meta-fictional sensibilities, he ends the story he is imagining by killing its protagonist: “does it have to end that way? Yes, probably yes.” He decides to recite another story that is: “low to the ground... a counter weight to the fantastic machine I’ve just built.” He wants to abandon the theory of multiple universes and share real events. Although he admits the theory’s importance, there are more important, or one dare say ‘real’ stories to tell: “provocative stuff, yes, but there are other stones to be unearthed as well.” (Auster 180)

6. Dialogue as an Antidote to Solipsism

In order for feelings to be recognized and embraced, they have to be shared with someone who would identify with them and by extension identify with the person sharing his story. Timmer (2010) invokes Kenneth Gergen’s work on narrative psychology and how the self is no longer viewed through the lens of the postmodern individualistic narrative construction, rather the self is understood through its interaction with others. (p. 337). Accordingly, an account of the self is made possible through communicative practices. In Paul Auster’s *Man in the Dark*, the protagonist is given a chance to share his story with his granddaughter. When Katya asks why he refuses to write the memoir, he speaks with a regretful tone: “I’ve done such stupid things in my life, I didn’t have the heart to live through them again” (Auster, 2008, p. 199) However, when she presses him for information, he tells her that he cheated on his wife which was the cause of their separation for several years before they reunited. Despite the fact that they reconciled, he still feels guilty for the years they lost while they were apart, especially that now she has passed and he is lonely without her. The event that had brought them together, though, was the birth of their granddaughter, a moment of shared joy and pride: “when Sonia held you in her arms for the first time, she glanced over at me [...] her

face ... was illuminated.” (Auster, 2008, p. 249) After her grandfather shares his story, Katya shares her own experience of guilt and shame surrounding the death of her partner, she feels that the reason he felt for Iraq is that she could not love him: “I told him I didn’t want to see him anymore, and so he went off and got himself killed. He died because of me” (Auster, 2008, p. 250). At which point, August points to how in dire need they are of a way out of their mental states: “what I’m proposing is a cure, a remedy to ward off the blues.” (Auster, 2008, p. 256) He suggests they combine their skills, his story telling and her critical eye with film in order to make movies together “instead of looking at other people’s images.” (Auster, 2008, p. 255)

Once August and Katya’s conversations ends, the tone of the novel turns much more optimistic, as dawn on the protagonist’s dark night is only an hour away. For example, when his daughter comes in the room, they discuss the possibility of Katya resuming her academic career. In addition, symbolic for the hope that arises in the story, August and Miriam share their admiration for Rose Hawthorne’s line: “the weird world rolls on” (Auster, 2008, p. 273) which suggests that despite the difficulties, there is still hope for a better day. Thus, when people are engaged in meaningful dialogue, there is a chance to create a life story that is less solipsistic, more connected and hopeful.

7. Conclusion

In summary, Timmer’s three dimensional analysis of the contemporary project to revive the subject in literature has given leeway to read Auster’s *Man in the Dark* in its light. Initially, the protagonist, August Brill, struggles to forge an autonomous identity that is able to make sound decisions. Such a struggle leads him to feel like a hollow man immersed in a depressive state of mind, a psychological condition that he shares with his daughter and granddaughter. As such, he escapes the realities of his life in order to imagine a story of another world. However, he eventually abandons the escapist storytelling and faces his emotions and accepts them. Finally, through dialogue he is able to make sense of himself and his story, as well as help his daughter and granddaughter see their lives with more hopeful eyes.

Bibliography

- Auster, P. (2008). *Man in the Dark*. Henry Holt and Company.
- Bennett, A., and Royle, N. (2016). *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*.
- Routledge.

- Berezkina, V.L. (2003). American Postmodernist Literature at the Turn of the Millennium: the Death and Return of the Subject. K. Stierstorfer (Ed.), *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessment in Literature, Theory, and Culture* (pp. 269-290). De Gruyter.
- Gergen, K.J. (2009). *Realities and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction*. Harvard University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford University Press.
- Hassan, I. (2003). *Beyond Postmodernism: Towards an Aesthetic of Trust*. K. Stierstorfer (Ed.), *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessment in Literature, Theory, and Culture* (pp. 303- 316). de Gruyter.
- Huber, I. (2014). *Literature after Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kraft, Q. (1996). *Toward a Critical Re-Renewal: At the Corner of Camus and Bloom Street*.
- W.V. Harris (Ed.), *Beyond Poststructuralism: The Speculations of Theory and the Experience of Reading* (pp. 235-257) The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Schrag, C.O. (1997). *The Self after Postmodernity*. Yale University Press.
- Timmer, N. (2010). *Do You Feel It Too?: The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*. Rodopi.