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PAUL AUSTER'S TRANSCENDENTALISM: SHIFTING POSTMODERN SENSIBILITY IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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ABSTRACT. *This article traces Paul Auster's shift in sensibility after the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. While his earlier novels where paradigmatic of postmodern self-referentiality, several critics have argued that his post-9/11 production turned towards realism. This might be interpreted as subsidiary evidence in favor of the polemic debate around the death of postmodernism. However, the aim of this article is to outline the transformation of the writer and offer explanations as to why that change in sensibility does not respond to a divestiture of postmodernism, but to an intensification of it. I trace Auster's alternative to postmodern relativism, that is, transcendentalism, to arrive at the conclusion that his stance towards it is the same in his later novels.*

Keywords: Paul Auster, transcendentalism, Ludwig Wittgenstein, language games, Postmodernism, American fiction.

EL TRANSCENDENTALISMO DE PAUL AUSTER: CAMBIO DE SENSIBILIDAD POSTMODERNA EN EL NUEVO MILENIO

RESUMEN. *Este artículo es un análisis del cambio de sensibilidad que se produce en la obra de Paul Auster después de los ataques de 2001 contra el World Trade Center. Aunque sus novelas anteriores al suceso eran paradigmáticas de la autorreferencialidad posmoderna, algunos críticos han argumentado que la producción del autor posterior al once de septiembre dio un giro hacia el realismo. Esto podría interpretarse como evidencia subsidiaria a favor del polémico debate en torno a la muerte del posmodernismo. Sin embargo, el objetivo de este artículo es describir la transformación que sufre la obra del escritor y ofrecer explicaciones de por qué ese cambio de sensibilidad no responde a una renuncia del posmodernismo, sino a una intensificación del mismo. Trazamos la alternativa de Auster al relativismo posmoderno, es decir, el trascendentalismo, para llegar a la conclusión de que su postura hacia el mismo no ha cambiado sus novelas posteriores.*

Palabras clave: Paul Auster, trascendentalismo, Ludwig Wittgenstein, juegos de lenguaje, Postmodernismo, ficción estadounidense.

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, Paul Auster's narrative underwent a series of transformations that some researchers have seen as a desire to leave postmodernism behind. Works such as *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005),[1] *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006)[2] or *Man in the Dark* (2008) show, as Stefania Ciocia and Jesús A. González indicate, a turn in his writing towards "'real' people" (2011: 4). In a way, this turn is a sort of response to Harold Bloom's criticism about his work: "in no way does Auster practice an art that seeks to imitate social reality" (Bloom 2004: 2). In this sense, one could read these novels by Auster as a reflection of the intended paradigm shift that was to follow the passing of postmodernism at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Moon Palace[3] was published two years after *The New York Trilogy*,[4] in 1989. That same year the Berlin Wall fell and the Reagan era ended. Postmodernism was at its zenith. *Sunset Park* was published in 2010.[5] The death of postmodernism had

1 Henceforth, *Follies*.
2 Henceforth, *Travels*.
3 Henceforth, *Moon*.
4 Henceforth, *Trilogy*.
5 Henceforth, *Sunset*.

already been assimilated by a wide sector of the theorists.[6] Its successor was in the process of formation when this happened. The contexts in which *Moon* and *Sunset* were written were very different from each other. Consequently, the way the author dealt with the same themes in them shifted. Although *Sunset* is not the first book by Auster to deal with social issues, it is the first in which he seems to be trying to achieve realism in the sense that Tom Wolfe gives to the word in his manifesto "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast" (1989). However, even if his point of view and his social involvement had changed, there was something that remained the same; he did not provide solutions for the moment of crisis, since there was no change in his postmodern sensibility towards the concept of reality. There was an inadequacy between the social, the cultural and the economic context on the one hand and what remained essentially Austerian on the other. Transcendentalism, which could be an answer to the problems presented in *Sunset,* was treated as something impossible to recover in a practical way in Auster's cynical universe based on chance.

Sunset's characters and themes are closely related to the ones in his novels written before *Follies*, the book that represents a change in his sensibility. After 2005, Auster seemed to want to distance himself from the last phase of postmodernism in order – perhaps cathartically – to reveal the lack of coherence in the formation of the identity of the turn-of-the-century individual and how this feeling intensified after the 9/11 attacks. Auster writes his way through a time that tries to leave behind the narrative games on which his works were based. It is for this reason that we find it fruitful to provide an analysis of the evolution of transcendentalism in Auster's work up to *Sunset*. I propose that the absence of the metanarratives that made the Austerian universe work makes less and less sense in the intended post-postmodern cultural phase. Although American Romanticism may have been an alternative for the paradigm shift of the turn of the millennium – as it was for younger writers as, for example, those representative of the New Sincerity movement – Auster's work remained thoroughly pessimistic and attached to the relativism of the Wittgensteinian language games.

2. TRANSCENDENTALIST INFLUENCES

The influence that both Ludwig Wittgenstein's thought and that of transcendentalist writers have had on Auster has been extensively studied. He

6 Theorists like Ihab Hassan and Linda Hutcheon had already proclaimed the passing of postmodernism. In "Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust" (2003), Ihab Hassan gave an answer to the following question "[W]hat was postmodernism" (199). According to Linda Hutcheon: "[f]or decades now, diagnosticians have been pronouncing on its health, if not its demise, with some of the major players in the debate weighing in on the negative side: for people like Terry Eagleton and Christopher Norris, postmodernism is certainly finished, even passé; indeed, for them it's a failure, an illusion. Perhaps we should just say: it's over" (5).

himself has admitted such influence in several interviews. Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry David Thoreau are always present when the author talks about the writers who have influenced him, although, of course, the inspiration of many other writers can be felt. Among those, he usually mentions Manuel de Cervantes, William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett, William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, James Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Leo Tolstoy, or Michel de Montaigne. In a 2005 interview with Mary Morris, Auster discussed his influences, especially Thoreau, but also other authors of the American Renaissance. In a 1987 interview with Joseph Mallia, he talks about the influence that Thoreau had on *Trilogy* and even about the influence that this author had on Hawthorne, one of the writers that Auster admires the most. This fact was expressed in an interview with Michael Wood when he was asked about the influence that nineteenth century American writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne had on him. He said of the latter: "[o]f all writers from the past, he's the one I feel closest to, the one who talks most deeply to me" (2013: 135). In a 2003 press conference for the Washington Post, led by Carole Burns, Auster admitted having been an avid reader of Wittgenstein during his youth (2013: 127) and he also recognized the influence of writers such as Hawthorne, Melville and Thoreau (2013: 128).

There are dozens of studies that establish the links between Auster and all these writers, nevertheless, it is easy for the reader to notice that he uses the names of the authors who influence him explicitly in almost all of his books. Wittgenstein, for example, is cited in *The Book of Illusions* (2002) and in *Follies*. In the former, he simply mentions him within a list of authors that define the tastes and personality of one of the characters – Auster usually uses this resource – and a little later, in the same paragraph, he alludes to Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson and Thoreau ([2002] 2003: 245). In *Follies*, he relates a well-known episode of the philosopher, which is also parallel to the feelings of the character that tells the story and his solipsism. According to Auster's anecdote, Wittgenstein worked as a teacher at a school in Austria, where, because of his irascible and severe nature, many of his students were terrified – some of them even suffered serious physical damage. The philosopher was forced to leave the post. Some twenty years later, already famous and respected, he suffered an existential crisis and decided to solve it by asking for forgiveness, one by one, from the students he had punished in his time as a teacher. However, Wittgenstein had caused them so much harm that they still remembered everything vividly. None of his students forgave him: "The pain he had caused had gone too deep, and their hatred for him transcended all possibility of mercy" (2005: 61).

Travels is the only novel that does not mention any of the members of the American Renaissance, although their presence is noticeable throughout the book. The aberrant resemblance to Thoreau's retirement in Walden Pond is evident. The configuration of the interior of the transcendentalist's cabin and that of the room in Auster's story are strikingly similar. The situation, however, is intertwined with the fragmentation brought about by Wittgensteinian thought, which can be seen in Auster's use of self-referential language in the novel.

In *Mr. Vertigo* (1994), none of these authors is named, but there is a character surnamed Hawthorne. Of all his fictional narrative works, the only ones in which the name Hawthorne does not appear are *Sunset*, *Invisible* (2009) and *Travels*. References to these writers range from their mere mention to the point of playing a fundamental role, either because they influence the plot in some way or because they define the characters and their way of acting. This happens, for example, with Emerson and Hawthorne in *Oracle Night* (2003). In one part of the book, they rob the apartment of Sidney Orr, the protagonist, and they take some books, among which there are first editions of Hawthorne, Dickens, Henry James, Fitzgerald, Wallace Stevens and Emerson. Also in this novel, an anecdote from Thoreau is told in passing, all of which traces the influences of the protagonist: "Thoreau said he had three chairs in his house, Ed remarks. One for solitude, two for friendship, and three for society. I've only got the one for solitude. Throw in the bed, and maybe there's two for friendship. But there's no society in here" ([2003] 2004: 72). The epigraph for *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) is a quote from Hawthorne's short story "The Celestial Railroad": "Not a great while ago, passing through the gate of dreams, I visited that region of the earth in which lies the famous City of Destruction". In *Moon*, where Emerson and Melville are mentioned in passing as a sterile influence for Julian, one of Hawthorne's sons: "A wretched human being. Imagine growing up with Melville and Emerson around the house and turning out like that. He wrote fifty-some books, hundreds of magazine articles, all of it trash" (1989: 140). In *The Book of Illusions*, one of the characters reads Hawthorne's story "The Birth-Mark" (1843) every day for six months. In *Follies*, a secondary character writes a university dissertation on Thoreau and Poe and the philosophy of both authors is explicitly discussed and is present throughout the book in the actions and wishes of the protagonists. Hawthorne is also a crucial part of the book's plot, not only the protagonist's name is Nathan, as in Nathaniel Hawthorne, but also the characters have a plan to sell a forgery of a manuscript by the writer.

In *Leviathan* (1992), Emerson himself is one of the characters in the novel written by Benjamin Sachs, one of the main characters, in jail. He appears alongside such figures as Walt Whitman, Ellery Channing, Rose Hawthorne – daughter of the writer –, or Sitting Bull and Buffalo Bill Cody. In this novel, Thoreau's influence

on Sachs profoundly affects the course of events. Inspired by Thoreau and his "Civil Disobedience" – or "Resistance to Civil Government" – (1849), Sachs starts living by the transcendental precepts. In a Thoreauvian fashion, he ends up in prison for refusing to go to the Vietnam War, and it is there that he will write *The New Colossus*, a book that plays an essential role in the plot of the novel. In a clear reference to what transcendentalism means for the recovery of identity, Peter Aaron, protagonist and narrator of the novel, says the following about a passage in *The New Colossus*: "The message couldn't be clearer. America has lost its way. Thoreau was the one man who could read the compass for us, and now that he is gone, we have no hope of finding ourselves again" (1992: 38-39). There is no hope of regaining the lost identity, even when Thoreau's compass is guiding Sachs's terrorist actions at the end of the book. Sachs's book bears the same name as a poem written by Emma Lazarus which, created to raise funds for the construction of the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, is on a bronze plaque inside it. In 2002, Auster states in a *New York Times* opinion piece, titled "The City and the Country", the following about that poem:

> Alone among American cities, New York is more than just a place or an agglomeration of people. It is also an idea.
>
> I believe that idea took hold in us when Emma Lazarus's poem was affixed to the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in 1903. Bartholdi's gigantic effigy was originally intended as a monument to the principles of international republicanism, but 'The New Colossus' reinvented the statue's purpose, turning Liberty into a welcoming mother, a symbol of hope to the outcasts and downtrodden of the world. (2002)

"The City and the Country" constitutes a criticism of the politics of the moment and deeply regrets the attacks of 9/11. Curiously enough, Sachs is devoted to a meaningful project at the end of the book: he wants to blow up all the replicas of the Statue of Liberty scattered throughout the geography of the United States. This is related with the title of the novel, as the statues represent the state itself. The epigraph of *Leviathan* is from Emerson's essay "Politics" (1844): "[e]very actual state is corrupt". The original text continues as follows: "[g]ood men must not obey the laws too well" ([1844] 2000: 382), which is precisely what Sachs does. Emerson fervently believed in the individual and the sense of community, but he was equally suspicious of the power of modern states – grounded in written laws – over individuals. This is linked to the concept of the Romantic state, as Berlin explains in *The Roots of Romanticism*:

> The State is not a machine, the State is not a gadget. If 'the State were a machine people would have thought of something else, but they have not. The State is either a natural growth or it is an emanation of some mysterious primal force which

> we cannot understand and which has some kind of theological authority' [...] the attempt to reduce this to constitutions, to laws, is doomed to failure because nothing written lives; no constitution, if it is written, can possibly survive, because writing is dead and the constitution must be a living flame within the hearts of human beings who live together as one passionate mystical family. ([1999] 2013: 135)

That is exactly Auster's conception of the "city-state of New York":

> Not long ago, I received a poetry magazine in the mail with a cover that read: "USA OUT OF NYC". Not everyone would want to go that far, but in the past several weeks I've heard a number of my friends talk with great earnestness and enthusiasm about the possibility of New York seceding from the union and establishing itself as an independent city-state. (Auster 2002)

He conceives a community of individuals who live "together as one passionate mystical family". The sense of community in Sachs's actions and in Auster's 2002 article are very different, although the opinion of both towards the state and politics is the same as Emerson's:

> No one is sorry that the Taliban regime has been ousted from power, but when I talk to my fellow New Yorkers these days, I hear little but disappointment in what our government has been up to. Only a small minority of New Yorkers voted for George W. Bush, and most of us tend to look at his policies with suspicion. He simply isn't democratic enough for us. (Auster 2002)

It is clear that Auster comes from a literary tradition that pays special attention to the nature of language, one of the themes in Emerson's and Wittgenstein's work. Ian Bell draws this obsession with language in American literature from its origins and links the anticipatory thinking of John Locke in this regard with the similar point of view of the transcendentalists:

> John Locke began Book III of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in anticipation of the peculiarly American concern with empirical philology by stressing "how great a dependence out words have on common sensible ideas", to claim "I doubt not but, if we could trace them to their sources, we should find, in all languages, the names which stand for things that fall not under our senses to have had their first rise from sensible ideas". (2000: xiv)

He links this with Emerson's idea of language expressed in *Nature* and related to the Herder's idea of *Ursprache*: "[s]ubsequently, we find Emerson's essay on 'Nature' arguing that 'Every word which is used to express a novel or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be formed from some material appearance'" (2000: xiv). Bell explains how Walt Whitman follows on Emerson's wake, picking up the idea that decisions in the linguistic field must be made by the masses,

the people who use the language in a more referential way. According to Bell, the relationship that the United States has with language is the conflict that has existed from the beginning between the need for an unambiguous referentiality "to maintain order, community, and communication" (2000: xv) and the need to disrupt that univocity "to pursue liberty, independence, and self-expression" (2000: xv). This dichotomy is still in force and the need to pursue freedom, independence and personal expression was brought to its ultimate consequences by postmodernism.

Auster and his characters are informed as much by postmodernism as by their own history and cultural origins. Although they long for their intuitive and action-based American tradition, their postmodern status does not make it possible for that action to be coherent in a search for truth and a solid identity. The American writers and thinkers Auster admires appeal to a referential language that connects – as in the case of transcendentalism – individuals, since it is tied to the idea of a superior structure, a truth that can be reached. However, that language has become, through its use over time, a tool that establishes arbitrary relationships with reality and hence the necessity for intuitive action. On the other hand, the postmodernity in which Auster matures as a writer, establishes parameters of incommensurability that destroy everything that his characters can hold on to in order to get rid of the burden of alienation that makes sense of reality through a language that has lost univocity and referentiality.

3. THE SUNSET OF POSTMODERNISM

Sunset can be read as a kind of literary palimpsest of its author's work. The characters, the plots and subplots, the places, the scenes, the traumas and the wishes of the Austerian universe are very recognisable in it. However, much of the criticism and many of the reviews of the novel coincide in pointing out that the novelist leaves postmodernism behind and turns to realism. Nevertheless, even though the novel differs from his previous works in the sensibility with which it deals with current issues, it does not construct an alternative to postmodern games. The characters continue to be unable to give structure to their identity. Auster does not adopt a classical causal stance, so the problem of individuals being deprived of the tools to divest themselves of the problems caused by the crisis is perpetuated and there is even an intensification and a perpetuation of the effects of capitalism. The novel constitutes a fossilization of solipsism and existentialism. Postmodern presentism does not give way to a project rooted in the past looking towards the future. Quite the opposite, the characters are condemned to live in an eternal decontextualized present. There is still no referentiality due to the

arbitrariness of language games, so that physical reality cannot be given a holistic meaning in a pre-postmodern fashion. These characteristics are present in the same way in works such as *Trilogy*, *Leviathan* or *Moon*. For this reason, I dare say that, although Auster adapts the sensibility to the moment of crisis in which he writes this novel, his attitude towards reality remains the same. His attempt at realism ends up looking like the one Wolfe champions in his manifesto: the use of a third-person narrator and the way the novel is written makes the style resemble a documentary; in the words of Jørgen Veisland:

> The narrator's voice, speaking consistently in the third person, is disseminated across the field of narration, recording the experience of several characters one by one, mostly employing the present tense, alternating somewhat with the past tense, thus achieving the effect of direct, simultaneous reportage, getting close to the characters and at the same time being distanced from them. (2015: 313)

Nonetheless, Veisland argues that the book is an experiment on realism. To support this, he contends that the hand of the artist in the novel "is liberated into a negativity not recorded by the brain but existing in its own right as autonomous creative activity in a space where the relations between sign and thing are dissolved" (2015: 313). What Veisland is aiming for makes plenty of sense, since he speaks about the way Auster experiments with realism by unifying signifier and signified through intuitive creative experience. According to Veisland,

> Here the hand of the artist is imbued with knowledge of itself as moving with some "shadow" that turns everything touched to "darkness" while also indicating the presence of a "light" [...] Creating in negativity, the artist's hand attempts to name the unnamable, the discarded; and it also tries to name itself as an unnamable, discarded object, i.e. as an object participating in the dissolution and (experimental, temporary) reconstitution of the relation between sign and thing. (2015: 313-314)

He seeks a level of referentiality to which the Romantics aspired. However, if we followed Veisland's argument, we could say that most of Auster's works are experiments on realism, since all his characters try to re-establish the lost referentiality to build an identity through commensurable truths. The important aspect is that all of those attempts in the Austerian universe end up frustrated – and *Sunset* is not an exception.

I begin deciphering the palimpsest by assimilating *Sunset* to its status as post-9/11 novel. Mark Lawson uses the term "credit crunch fiction" to refer to this kind of literature. He deals with the novelist's production from 2001 and establishes a relationship between his pre-crisis titles and *Sunset*, showing that there are differences regarding sensibility. Nonetheless, he finally ends up observing that the classic Austerian gaze is still present, he draws our attention to the elements that

make up the palimpsest, the classic Austerian narrative and topics. I would argue that Bloom's reproach of the absence of mimesis in Auster's work still obtains:

> Even when an Auster novel marches into the town square with a placard held high, it tends to keep at least one foot in the study. In the cross-section of recession America represented by *Sunset Park*, almost everyone is, or wants to be, a novelist, artist or performer. (Lawson 2020)

Lawson's criticism goes towards the coldness of the novel in terms of the topics with which it deals and Auster's liking for literary artifice. Peter Boxall also includes Paul Auster in a category of fiction that he calls "9/11 novel" (2013: 126). Boxall establishes a relationship between 9/11 and the change in sensibility with which novelists react to it in their narratives. The author explains that the new direction in fiction responds to the writers' commitment to the critical function of literature (2013: 127). For this reason, self-referentiality and experimental literary artifice do not come as naturally as in the early 1990s.

Sunset speaks of the decline of the United States as opposed to other novels by Auster that tell stories in a context configured under the aegis of the empire. The novel talks about a future totally stripped of a modern project. Jelena Šesnić contrasts the work *Amerika* (1927) by Kafka with *Sunset* in this line:

> Franz Kafka's discourse on the surface reiterates the myth of Modernity, progress, and avant-garde, riding on the tide of anti-traditionalism and feeding on a futuristic strain. On the other hand, Auster's novel depicts ideas of decline, eclipse, downfall, ending, and stagnation with such intensity that it clearly propagates the myth of decadence. (2011: 51)

Šesnić highlights that even the title of the novel conveys that feeling: "Sunset as a metaphorical waning of the West" (2014: 60), and draws attention to aspects such as the characters not even having a hope: "homeless and vulnerable characters unable to face the new times ushering in a new century where everything is a hazard, from violence, terrorism to the economy" (2014: 60).

In *Follies* there is a very significant passage related to Kafka and metanarratives. Tom tells his uncle Nathan a moving story about Kafka, which can be interpreted as a longing for Lyotardian metanarratives. In that story, Kafka, during a walk in a park in Berlin, finds a girl crying because she has lost her doll. Kafka assures the girl that the doll has gone on a trip and that he knows it because she herself has written a letter to him in which she narrates her travels. Therefore, he promises the girl that he will bring her the letter the following day. For three weeks, Kafka writes a letter to the little girl every day, making great efforts at night to compose it. In the last of them, the doll tells her that she has married, that she is very happy

and, then, says goodbye to the girl, who by then has already forgotten why she was sad. Now the girl has a story to hold on to, and although the story is false, believing it gives her hope. Tom is making a nostalgic defence of metanarratives. These holistic narratives give the individual the possibility of overcoming the problems posed by postmodernism. However, believing is only possible through a blind leap of faith, which is not easy to execute for a postmodern individual. All of the above, however, in Auster's novels, is posed as an unattainable solution. If in *Follies* the characters still have dreams and can pursue that modernist project exemplified in the story of Kafka and the doll, in *Sunset*, hope is absent right from the beginning. In the first pages, Auster tells us about a character without any ambitions or projects: "He is twenty-eight years old, and to the best of his knowledge he has no ambitions. No burning ambitions, in any case, no clear idea of what building a plausible future might entail for him" ([2010] 2011: 6). Mark Ford points out that, for Emerson, the result of a crisis should be the rediscovery of one's own origins, and then refers to pure intuitive action: "'[w]e must hold hard', he writes in 'Experience', 'to this poverty, however scandalous, and by more vigorous self-recoveries, after the sallies of action, possess our axis more firmly'" (1999: 202). By abandoning all projects, Auster strips his characters from any future fuelled by intuitive action.

After 9/11, Auster's narrative has echoed the significance of this social drama for the US. The way of dealing with terrorism, for example, changes dramatically from *Leviathan* to *Follies*, but that change continues to obey a fundamentally postmodern schema. Thus, even as the author's work penetrates the twenty-first century, his characters continue to seek referentiality, essentialism and causality to shape their solipsistic and existentialist identity. Although Auster is aware of the moment of crisis, his writing is still as fragmented and as self-referential as in *Trilogy*. Coincidences continue to occur for no apparent reason and, although the characters try to give meaning to these coincidences, they continue to obey no structure. Thus, at the end of *Follies*, Nathan, the protagonist of the novel, after suffering a heart attack from which he recovers, thinks that he has no control over his life; he starts believing in destiny. His existentialism disappears once the meaning of his life does not depend on him. Nathan begins to believe that there is some structure in the universe and he even appeals to the gods for their miraculous intervention.

> I said, I didn't live through cancer in order to die from some dumb-ass coronary infarction. It was an absurd statement, but as the day wore on and the blood tests continued to come in negative, I clung to it as logical proof that the gods had decided to spare me, that the attack of the previous night had been no more than a demonstration of their power to control my fate [...] If there was anything to be learned from this brush with mortality, it was that my life [...] was no longer my own. (2005: 299)

He wants to think that mere coincidences do not exist; that everything belongs to an intelligent design, even if we cannot understand it. He recovers the essence of the unfinished project of modernity.[7] He makes plans for the future that are the product of a modernist epiphany – the chapter is called "Inspiration" –: "[b]y the time I saw where I was going, I understood that I had come up with the single most important idea I had ever had, an idea big enough to keep me occupied every hour of every day for the rest of my life" (2005: 300). His life makes sense, and he even thinks of a project to start acting transcendentally. However, forty-six minutes after leaving the hospital where he experienced his epiphany, the first plane crashes into the World Trade Center ending the new sense that Nathan had given to reality. This is what Auster calls in his autobiography "The ghoulish trigonometry of fate" (2012: 224). The pessimistic end of the novel, which puts everything that has happened in it into perspective, brings Nathan back to the postmodern presentism.

The optimism of Emerson, Thoreau or Whitman is always seen as unattainable. The symbolism of Sachs's attacks in *Leviathan* are pure transcendentalist intuitive action; they are symbolic events that, on the other hand, do not lead to anything other than the death of the person who carried them out – as Sachs accidentally blows himself up. The sensibility of *Follies* remains self-referential, but the seriousness of the events makes the end of the novel feel closer to the current zeitgeist. However, in a 1989 interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, Auster comments the following about coincidences:

> Chance? Destiny? Or simple mathematics, an example of probability theory at work? It doesn't matter what you call it. Life is full of such events [...] As a writer of novels, I feel morally obligated to incorporate such events into my books, to write about the world as I experience it, not as someone else tells me it's supposed to be. The unknown is rushing in on top of us at every moment. As I see it, my job is to keep myself open to these collisions, to watch out for all these mysterious goings-on in the world. (McCaffery and Gregory 2013: 15)

In this passage, the word "destiny" is placed – as if they were all plausible options – on the same level as "probability theory" and "mathematics," which is reminiscent of "the ghoulish trigonometry of fate." The reason why these events occur is irrelevant, but, as a writer, he feels obliged to make it clear that they occur without any apparent purpose or with one that he cannot understand, just because the contrary would be dishonest. That duality is always present in his work. It tends to make one think of Tom Wolfe's journalistic realism, whose task is not to make sense of reality, but to collect it as it is and give it a narrative

7 As advocated by Jürgen Habermas in "Modernity versus Postmodernity" (1981).

format. Shaping these events through language is a task that, as postmodernism has instructed us, leads to nothing conclusive. That is probably the reason why in Auster's books there is always the feeling that life has no meaning or that, at least, it is impossible to access for both characters and readers.

As a postmodern individual, influenced by the Wittgensteinian relativism of language games, the author adopts a view on science that is not guided by any ulterior motivation – notion that had crystallized in Kuhn's theory of scientific paradigm shifts. If we read his characters in this light, it could be said that the author captures that feeling and its result: his characters fall into social alienation. Nonetheless, as an individual born before postmodernism, and as an inveterate reader, the author assumes that behind those coinciding events that fill and guide the course of his works there is something hidden that we do not get to understand. That is to say, there is some type of superior structure that we simply must accept.

4. INTUITIVE ACTION AGAINST THE INCOMMENSURABILITY OF LANGUAGE GAMES

Action, as a trope, is commonplace in American culture. The country was forged during the exploration of the continent, during its expansion to the west. Action is not only a symbol of the conquest of the territory – of the American doctrine of *Manifest Destiny* –, but also of the creation of an identity through discovery, through knowledge. For Emerson, action and knowledge/learning are synonyms. In "The American Scholar" (1849), Emerson presents knowledge not as something stagnant, but as a changing notion that depends on the historical and social situation. Thus, in order to arrive at absolute truths, the individual cannot trust inherited knowledge, as it may not adapt to his/her present context. Emerson, then, calls that individual to action. In the same essay, Emerson affirms that books are "the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst" ([1837] 1998b: 1104). The correct use of books should be to inspire, and "[t]he one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul" (1988: 1104). The essence, then, is an intuitive kind of action. Emerson democratizes this notion and makes it intrinsically American by assuring that "[t]his every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him" ([1837] 1998b: 1104). He describes this intuitive action as follows:

> The soul active sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates. In this action, it is genius [...] In its essence, it is progressive. The book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind, stop with some past utterance of genius. This is good, say they, – let us hold by this. They pin me down. They look backward and not forward. But genius looks forward: the eyes of man are set in his forehead, not in

> his hindhead: man hopes: genius creates. Whatever talents may be, if the man create not, the pure efflux of the Deity is not his; – cinders and smoke there may be, but not yet flame. ([1837] 1998b: 1104)

In Auster's novels, transcendentalism is also a framework of action that can confront an alienating reality. However, language limits our understanding of the world and makes us unable to communicate effectively with others. In *Winter Journal*, a memoir, he expressly recognizes this fact by recounting an episode in which he attends the rehearsal of a dance performance without music. The act is divided into two kinds of presentations: segments of the performance interrupted by the explanations of the choreographer. Auster relates that the experience of seeing the dancers move to the beat of an inaudible rhythm, except for the sound their bodies made on stage, made it possible to transcend reality and look inside himself, "the mere sight of their bodies in motion seemed to be carrying you to some unexplored place within yourself" (2012: 222). He experiences a great feeling of happiness that is interrupted when the dancers, after a few minutes, stop, and the choreographer goes out on stage to explain the meaning of what the spectators are seeing. However, as much as she speaks, Auster understands less and less, since "[h]er words were utterly useless" (2012: 223). The representation makes him understand the impossibility of arriving at the truth by way of language:

> bodies in motion followed by words, beauty followed by meaningless noise, joy followed by boredom, and at a certain point something began to open up inside you, you found yourself falling through the rift between world and word, the chasm that divides human life from our capacity to understand or express the truth of human life. (2012: 223)

The introspection to which this passage leads, and the fact that the action coincides in time with the death of her father, unifies his work, giving it closure. This incident is the one referred to by the phrase "the ghoulish trigonometry of fate" (2012: 224): the coincidence of the discovery of the truth that gives meaning to his identity and the tragic episode of his father. In that phrase Auster's incongruent attitude towards the question of chance is summarized because trigonometry cannot be macabre, since it responds to natural laws; the macabre quality, obviously, is provided by the one who interprets it subjectively – which gives it a purpose. The author sincerely understands the way to reach his goal in the passage of the representation of the dancers: absence of mediation with the experience of reality. It is about taking that leap of faith not mediated by language.

5. AUSTER'S CHANGE OF SENSIBILITY

Irmtraud Huber is one of the scholars who point to an end of postmodernism in the work of Auster. She puts *Man in the Dark* as a paradigmatic model of the death of postmodernism and of a return to realism. According to Huber, the metafictional death of the narrator in the work also supposes the symbolic death of "postmodern paradoxes":

> Brick's sudden and off-hand demise, I would claim, is nothing less than symbolic. Alongside his assassinated body, postmodernism's paradoxes are given their (more or less) decent burial. Increasingly, attention is turned to other issues, more down-to-earth stuff, the grit of war and loss, human belief and betrayal and the endless variations of inter-human relationships [...] In a very decided and marked way the novel thus turns away from postmodernist fantastical machines towards '[s]omething low to the ground', which it finds in the mimetic stance of testimonial realism. It no longer indulges in the imaginative freedom of fiction's possible worlds, but reclaims its fictional world as coextensive with experiential reality. (2014: 22)

In the introduction to *The Invention of Illusions*, Stefania Ciocia and Jesús A. González also allude to Auster's work and to the possible consciousness of postmodernity and the denial of it in works such as *Travels* or *Follies*. In the first chapter of the same book, "Loss, Ruins, War: Paul Auster's Response to 9/11 and the 'War on Terror'", Paolo Simonetti speaks of a "shift from a postmodernist sensitivity to a new historical consciousness" (2011: 14), which indicates a change of perspective. Simonetti argues that there is a "paradigm shift" (2011: 15) towards realism in fiction, as many others have already done: "[n]ow, in order to keep up with the media-saturated contemporary world, it seems that fiction has veered toward a new kind of realism" (Simonetti 2011: 14). In addition, although Auster, Simonetti affirms, considers himself a realistic writer, he could not be included in post-postmodernism from the point of view from which the realism of its narratives is calibrated. The mere fact that after the attacks his writing became less self-referential and more conscious of the current history, or that he dealt with events closer to "real" characters – as Ciocia and González point out – does not change the fact that the writer's relationship with reality continued to be mediated by language games. Simonetti indicates that in *Follies* there is an optimistic wish for the future:

> "we've entered a new era, Nathan. The post-family, post-student, post-past age of Glass and Wood [...] The now. And also the later. But no more dwelling on the then" [...] Auster makes thus clear that the new millennium requires an original approach to history and temporality, different from the witty linguistic plays of postmodernism, and in his most recent novels he tries to negotiate a new relationship between history and fiction. (2011: 19)

The characters make plans for the future. Nathan has an exciting project that, through connecting with other people's feelings and creating a structure, will finally give meaning to his life, but at the end of the book, the attack on the towers ends all those projects and dreams. This ending deprives his character of an optimistic future in which people's lives matter. Through Nathan's frustrated project, those lives would have been reflected in written form in biographies that would have recovered their fragmented memories to make a holistic story. The name he intended to give this project was "Bios Unlimited":

> Most lives vanish. A person dies, and little by little all traces of that life disappear. An inventor survives in his inventions, an architect survives in his buildings, but most people leave behind no monuments or lasting achievements: a shelf of photograph albums, a fifth-grade report card, a bowling trophy, an ashtray filched from a Florida hotel room on the final morning of some dimly remembered vacation. A few objects, a few documents, and a smattering of impressions made on other people. Those people invariably tell stories about the dead person, but more often than not dates are scrambled, facts are left out, and the truth becomes increasingly distorted, and when those people die in their turn, most of the stories vanish with them. (Auster 2005: 301)

Nathan intended to regain connection with those lives in order to get rid of his own solipsism and theirs, to regain an optimistic ethos through making a complete narrative from loose pieces.

At the beginning of *Sunset*, we see Miles, the protagonist, doing something that is related in essence to Nathan's project: he works cleaning homes of evicted families. The company he works for is subcontracted by the banks to which those houses belong. Like the people Nathan wanted to portray in his project, evicted families leave behind objects that tell about their fragmented story:

> By now, his photographs number in the thousands, and among his burgeoning archive can be found pictures of books, shoes, and oil paintings, pianos and toasters, dolls, tea sets, and dirty socks, televisions and board games, party dresses and tennis racquets, sofas, silk lingerie, caulking guns, thumbtacks, plastic action figures, tubes of lipstick, rifles, discolored mattresses, knives and forks, poker chips, a stamp collection, and a dead canary lying at the bottom of its cage. ([2010] 2011: 5)

The situation seems to be a direct consequence of the ending of *Follies*. Nathan's exciting and quasi-philanthropic project has become in *Sunset* a project to benefit banks. However, although Miles is not very convinced of what he does – the job is called "trashing out" –, the narrator cynically says that

> [i]n a collapsing world of economic ruin and relentless, ever-expanding hardship, trashing out is one of the few thriving businesses in the area. No doubt he is lucky

> to have found this job. He doesn't know how much longer he can bear it, but the pay is decent, and in a land of fewer and fewer jobs, it is nothing if not a good job. ([2010] 2011: 4)

It is his job and he understands what that means in the post-financial-crisis context, but Miles feels a need to take pictures of the objects people leave behind. Miles needs to connect with other lives, just like Nathan. He feels compelled to narrate the lives of those anonymous people who have something to tell: "he senses that the things are calling out to him, speaking to him in the voices of the people who are no longer there, speaking to him in the voices of the people who are no longer there" ([2010] 2011: 5). That is not the only resemblance with *Follies*. At the end of *Sunset*, Miles gets excited about a project, but everything falls apart and Miles reflects on the impossibility of doing absolutely nothing. In that ending, the image of the Twin Towers are also present. He thinks about the inevitability of postmodern presentism and the absence of optimism in the future: "they will never have their life together in New York, there is no future for them anymore, no hope for them anymore" ([2010] 2011: 307). The attacks on the World Trade Center cast a long pessimistic shadow at the end of *Sunset*:

> as the car travels across the Brooklyn Bridge and he looks at the immense buildings on the other side of the East River, he thinks about the missing buildings, the collapsed and burning buildings that no longer exist, the missing buildings and the missing hands, and he wonders if it is worth hoping for a future when there is no future. ([2010] 2011: 307-308)

The presence of the symbol of the attacks, and what they mean, is also manifested in this novel through the image of the burning buildings that no longer exist.

The problem of these Austerian characters is that, quoting Simonetti, as heirs to postmodernism, they are forced to renegotiate the relationship they establish between words and objects in reality (Simonetti 2011: 24). They need to endow the language with which they relate to reality with referentiality and essentialism. However, they find it extremely complex, and in the case of Auster, hopeless. A connection similar to the one between *Leviathan* and *Follies* can be established between *Moon* and *Sunset*. The use of transcendentalism in both novels is similar. The postmodern age of language games made this construction of identity impossible and, in the post-postmodern hyper-capitalist era, Auster followed faithful to his oxymoronic duty as a postmodern realist writer.

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