

Border Crossing: American Dreams, Illusions and Fictions in Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* (2008)

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Despite being one of his least artistically convincing novels so far,¹ Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark*, returns to some of the themes evident in his previous novels such as loneliness, American and Jewish cultural identities, travelling, and life in contemporary urban United States. In his novel *Man in the Dark*, it seems movement, travelling, and border crossings create central metaphors through the use of which Auster 1) reconsiders various myths related to American cultural identity such as the American Dream, Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism, democracy and travelling as symbolic of freedom; 2) points out the problematic nature of both personal and cultural identity in the contemporary world and emphasizes not a diasporic, but rather a transnational nature of contemporary Jewish liberal identity in the USA; and 3) deals with ontological questions related to the relationship between language and reality, life and art, between actual, fictional, fantastic and imaginary worlds.

Traditionally, the border has implied the idea of separation, for example, the separation of geographical territories or different states, regions, and cultures. This separation also implies a difference, a difference in historical, cultural, and even ethical values represented by separated territories. But in his *Man in the Dark*, Paul Auster undermines the idea of border as separation and difference and, instead, eradicates the essentialist meaning of a border. Auster uses a metaphor of a border not as a metaphor implying stability (of a territory and people's cultural identity living on this territory) but he develops it to a metaphor of fluidity. Fluidity becomes connected with the idea of cultural identity not as a stable, fixed but rather transitional concept.

1 *Man in the Dark* lacks conviction because of the simple explicitness of the ideas, because of its moralizing, a certain sentimentalism, undeveloped characters such as Owen Brick (situated in his fictional world before he attempts to kill his inventor and a writer, August Brill), because Auster's apparent attempt to be in tune with current political themes such as terrorism, because of the predictable use of his postmodern narrative techniques, etc.

American Dream

Beginning his first-person narration, August Brill says “I am alone in the dark, turning the world around in my head as I struggle through another bout of insomnia, another white night in the great American wilderness” (Auster 1).

This passage points out a personal crisis and illness of an ageing man, a 72-year old former reviewer and a writer, but his last words ironically refer to the contemporary condition and invoke a transfiguration of the past colonial American “wilderness”. The passage actually refers to contemporary America and implies a critique of the nature of contemporary American society, especially the free rules related to capital which negatively influence human relationships. The personal crisis manifests itself not only in August’s, but also in his daughter’s and granddaughter’s lives, who he is living with after his car accident. The relative financial security of his daughter and his granddaughter would be an evidence of a partial fulfillment of the American Dream, if it were not for the personal suffering (Miriam’s divorce, and the brutal murder of Katya’s boyfriend in the war in Iraq) of all the characters which creates a metaphor of failure. It is a failure of the American Dream which Katya’s boyfriend cannot achieve in the USA but by earning money through literally and symbolically joining violence in Iraq. His involvement in war finally results in tragic consequences – his brutal assassination highlights not only the materialist character of American society but also the failure of the American dream since not only is he brutally killed, but so is the idea of success connected with the money he has earned by going to Iraq.

The metaphor of crossing the borders thus acquires both negative and positive consequences in this context – negative because Katya’s boyfriend’s crossing of the border ends in tragedy, and positive because all these characters cross the borders of the reality they live in and find an emotional compensation in various art forms, that is a state of mind stimulating imagination as a source of value – August by telling stories, watching and discussing films with his granddaughter, and his daughter Miriam by writing a critical book on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s daughter’s life. Thus rather than materialist values, consumerism, violence and military practices as represented by the war in Iraq, it seems they are rather emotional values and imagination stimulating creativity which become a source of ethical values in Auster’s novel. Transgressing the borders of the real by invading the world of imagination thus means not only a symbolic denial of reality as a source of corrupted materiality, but especially the appreciation of the immaterial and the imaginary as a source of value, represented in this case by different forms of art.

Travelling, Motion and Freedom

Crossing the borders is closely connected with movement, motion and travelling which have acquired positive connotations in modern America as symbols not only of progress, but also of democracy represented by the possibility of free movement. According to Markku Salmela, “The individualism inherent in a life on the open road and the barely definable promise of political and economic emancipation symbolized by Lady Liberty—these may well be the two most dominant archetypes of the concept of freedom in the United States” (Salmela 134). But in Paul Auster’s fiction, this movement often acquires a different meaning as a metaphor of escape from chaotic, violent and corrupted reality and a search for both personal and cultural identity. In his article on the relativity of spatial freedom in Auster’s fiction, Markku Salmela observes “the dissociation from place inherent in travel by car” (133) in Auster’s works. He further argues that in his fiction “spatial freedom tends to incur a sense of disorientation and confusion, even mortal danger” (134) to emphasize “the relativity of freedom” (134) in Auster’s fiction. This can be true about his *Man in the Dark* – for both his protagonists August Brill, a writer, essayist and critic, and Owen Brick, his fictional character, a travelling magician in a fictional actual world who mysteriously finds himself in a dark pit, August is bound to a wheelchair and cannot move properly, and Owen’s travelling is rather an escape from danger and apocalyptic America rather than of the freedom represented by it.

Thus in *Man in the Dark*, a metaphor of movement and travelling acquires different, both positive and negative connotations— negative because they represent an escape from brutal apocalyptic reality (for Brick) and from the misery of ageing and loneliness (for August Brill), and positive because it is an escape to the world of imagination as represented by fiction writing which is able to create a mental asylum and a protection against dullness of corrupted and consumerist reality. Auster further develops various connotations related to the relationship between the actual fictional world of August Brill and metafictional world of Owen Brick all connected with a metaphor of border crossing. In his real, actual world, August and his family are only indirectly, however brutally, connected with the War in Iraq and its negative consequences. Yet Auster seems to point out negative consequences of colonialist practices based on the hunt for money which ultimately leads to violence, disintegration and death in the parallel post-apocalyptic world of Owen Brick. To escape from this world means to cross the borders between the imaginary and real world of August Brill which Owen achieves through accepting an offer from his sponsors to kill the author creating him in the actual world (August Brill) to get to this world through accepting the magic shot. Both characters are now in the same world reminiscent of the actual world, but Brick is unable to kill his creator and writer August since bombing and destruction indicate a beginning of war in this world.

Thus despite both characters seeming to be now on the same ontological level and in the world of actual reality, it seems Auster suggests not distance, but closeness, actuality and presence of violence, terrorism and war, turning imagination into reality since August is both literally and symbolically arrested in this reality by his inability to move and Owen Brick, his character, because his constant crossing of boundaries between actual and fictional worlds does not mean an escape, but emphasizes the inescapability of violence, terror, and disintegration. Travelling, movement, and mobility as symbols of freedom and democracy are thus ironically turned into a metaphor of arrest, passivity and inescapability of violence and disintegration stimulated by greed and a yearning for money as represented not only by Duke Rothstein, Lou Frisk from August Brill's fictional apocalyptic story on war but also by Katya's boyfriend who cannot see the moral implications of his involvement in the Iraq War; he protested against it and only went to the Middle East as a civilian driver. This also points out relativity of freedom occurring in Auster's fiction according to Salmela—one has a chance to choose freedom, but it is determined by many factors making this freedom limited—for example, he cannot prevent the political and military machinery violating the freedom of other individuals, nations and countries and, as seen in the example of Katya's boyfriend, if his work in the Iraq is understood as economic necessity, the freedom is limited by the economic situation of an individual.

Personal and Cultural Identities

Despite the fact that on one of its narrative levels *Man in the Dark* can be read as a story of the reconciliation of characters with their personal traumas, tragedies, divorces, deaths and ageing, and as depiction of a crisis of their personal identities, they are not only personal and individual identities which are at the center of Auster's attention. Most of the main characters are displaced from their roots and occupy a position of in-betweenness despite being integrated into either the European or American cultural environment. This in-betweenness position is especially depicted by Auster's depiction of travelling. August Brill, his wife Sonia, his daughter and granddaughter are depicted as having complex identities created by the interaction between the various cultural contexts they have been shaped by. They live in the USA, but their Jewish identities are reminiscent of the wandering Jew and are rather combinations of anti-essentialist practices secured by the movement, mobility and crossing of borders between different countries and regions. It is not a diasporic identity as understood by Safran, for example. In his view,

The concept of diaspora [can] be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics:

- 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original 'centre' to two or more 'peripheral' or foreign regions;
- 2) they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history and achievements;
- 3) they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it.

As Safran further observes,

- 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and the place to which they or their descendents would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate;
- 5) they believe they should collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and
- 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship (Safran 83–84).

August Brill, his wife, his daughter and granddaughter are or have been (August's wife Sonia has died) living in the USA and have adopted this country as their new home despite being of Jewish origin. Despite their ancestors having been "dispersed from an original centre" (Safran 83), most other characteristics according to Safran do not apply to them and these characters display no urge to return to their native country, this time Israel, in the future. August lives in the USA, but he and Sonia maintain ties with Sonia's original country, France, through occasional visits to the country as Miriam, does. For August, a return to Europe means not only a re-establishment of the relationship with his parents-in-law, but also a return to the European cultural tradition his ancestors might have been influenced by. Despite being French, Miriam's cultural identity and belonging is also quite problematic. Sonia's father, Alexander Weil, was a Jew born in Strasbourg and influential research biologist, her mother was born in Lyon, France, "but both of her grandfathers were protestant ministers, which means that Sonia was hardly your typical French girl. No Catholics anywhere in sight, no Hail Marys, no visits to the confession box" (Auster 139). In addition, due to the rise of fascism, Sonia's parents are forced to cross borders, travel and come to the USA hoping to return to France after the war.

Thus like August, who came from a mixed family, "a Jewish mother and an Episcopalian father" (140), Sonia's identity and cultural belonging is also quite problematic. Despite being French by nationality, she is hardly typically French and her identity is composed of Jewish, European Catholic and Protestant traditions

and thus she also seems to occupy a position of-betweenness oscillating between Jewish-European-Catholic-Protestant and American cultures. Like August, her position is reminiscent of the wandering Jew who must be in a constant motion trying to find a place of belonging. According to Bill Ashcroft, “In-betweenness is not a state of suspended subjectivity [...] but a state of fluidity, of porous boundaries, of travel between subject positions” (Ashcroft 78). But Ashcroft further explains that the concept of in-betweenness does not mean “being lost or undecided or absent” (78) but points out that it is rather a condition of contemporary migrating subjects in a globalized world freely moving between nation borders and deciding upon their place of belonging.

In contrast to Sonia’s parents who are forced to leave France considered by them to be their home country and finally return, their cultural identity being rather close to a diasporic identity as characterized above, August’s and Sonia’s identities are different in nature. Despite their frequent travelling between the USA and France, they decide to live in the USA and do not wish to go either to France or Israel which would be one of the possible options to restore and perhaps secure their cultural belonging. The USA thus represents a fixed point of their belonging and the most adequate decision for the re-establishment of their new, this time transnational identities in the country created by immigrants if we exclude the Native and Black American inhabitants. This fixity as contrasted to mobility, movement as well as a myth of wandering Jew these characters are reminiscent of, and further emphasized by, the literal representation of August’s fixity to place, that is because he is bound to a wheelchair and the USA. Through a depiction of this literal fixity, that is of August’s family to the USA, however, Auster does not emphasize an essentialist position, but rather an anti-essentialist and rather transnational identity. This is represented by August family’s regular movements and travelling to re-establish their ties with other parts of their cultural belonging (mostly European) and with August’s reluctance to identify with contemporary American values and politics which is manifested in August’s vision of fighting, post-apocalyptic, fragmented, divided, brutal America as projected in the parallel world of Owen Brick. If we take Auster narrator’s statement that “The real and the imagined are one” (177), then August’s story represents his fictional refusal to identify with America and this identity. America, New York or Vermont is the place he has to live but it does not mean he and his family has to identify with all its values, cultural and political practices. Thus August and his family seem to achieve anti-essentialist and transnational identities in Bill Ashcroft’s understanding. In Bill Ashcroft’s view,

The idea of a ‘transnation’ disrupts and scatters the construct of centre and periphery, which continues [...] to maintain its hold on our understanding of the structure of global relations. If we think of the ‘transnation’ extending beyond the geographical, political, administrative and even

imaginative boundaries of the state, both within and beyond the boundaries of the nation, we discover it as a space in which those boundaries are disrupted, in which national and cultural affiliations are superseded, in which binaries of centre and periphery, national self and other are dissolved (Ashcroft 73).

Thus despite living in the geographical territory of the USA, August Brill family's cultural identity is reminiscent of transnational identity going beyond the boundaries of the state where national and cultural affiliations are superseded and which is composed of complex influences of European, French, Jewish, Protestant, Catholic and American cultures.

Language and Reality, Real and the Imaginary

Several critics have dealt with Auster's depiction of loneliness, chance, the relationship between language and reality, the image of a room, the process of writing, and many other issues related to the relationship between language and reality. In his study of Paul Auster's fiction, Mark Brown identifies central themes of Auster's fiction such as "the capacity of language to represent; language as a way of being in the world; the failure of language symbolised as the fall of man" (Brown 13). He also argues that Auster's "interests are twofold. First, he attempts to understand the 'distance' between the material world and the words that are meant to represent it. Secondly, he is concerned with the ability of the poet to position himself between the monolithic structures of the material world and language in such a way that the words he uses to represent his experience are adequate to that experience" (Brown 12).

This is also true of Paul Auster's novel *Man in the Dark*, but he seems to slightly modify the themes in this novel by playing other tricks on the reader and by a manipulation and eradication of the difference between actual physical, imaginary, artistic and dream worlds. In her book on *Theory of Possible Worlds in Literature*, Ruth Ronen argues that "[...] fictional worlds are ontologically and structurally distinct: facts of the actual world have no a priori ontological privilege over facts of the fictional world" (Ronen 12). She further explains that "The fictional world system is an independent system whatever the type of fiction constructed and the extent of its drawing on our knowledge of the actual world. (Ronen 12). And Ronen further observes, "Since fictional worlds are autonomous, they are not more or less fictional according to degrees of affinity between fiction and reality: facts of the actual world are not constant reference points for the facts of fiction" (12). In Ronen's view, then, "fictional worlds are non-actualized in the world but 'actualizable' [...] whereas fictional worlds are non-actualized in the world but also non-actualizable, belonging to a different sphere of possibility and impossibility altogether" (Ronen 51).

If we take Auster's book as a whole representing fictional worlds and an independent ontological system, it is true that it is a separate ontological system which is "non-actualized" in a real world, but within the fictional world of Auster's novel, the author depicts the actual physical, imaginary world of fiction and films, dreams and memories and the characters with transworld identities (Owen Brick, Virginia, Sarge Serge, Rothstein, and others) whose movement between the metafictional world of fiction (the story August is telling) and the actual world of August Brill within the fictional world of Auster's novel is accepted as natural since the reader imagines it all almost as the fantastical world of a fairy tale in which such migration is possible and because Owen Brick, to get to the actual world, must receive a magic shot to get there. Thus despite a difference between the ontological status of these worlds, the characters from the fictional world are aware of and know about the real physical world of August Brill, and August Brill must be necessarily aware of the characters from the fictional world he is constructing. But the Sergeant who orders Brick to kill August in the actual world says that August, by writing a story, invented a war "and everything that happens or is about to happen is in his head. Eliminate that head, and the war stops. It's that simple" (Auster 2008: 10). And Owen Brick, a fictional character August Brill invents, asks a sergeant: "You are saying it's a story, that a man is writing a story, and we're all part of it. Something like that. And after he's killed, then what? The war ends, but what about us? Everything goes back to normal. Or maybe we just disappear" (10). All characters thus seem to confirm not only the fictionality of the fictional worlds they inhabit but, at the same time, the equality between these worlds and their ontological levels. They easily transgress the boundaries and limitations of their world and cross the borders between the real, imaginary, dream, and fantastic. But if we follow Auster's characters from fictional world logics (soldiers, Virginia, a double agent, etc.), then the act of assassination of a writer, that is August Brill, would mean not only the end of war (in the story they are in), the end of destruction and chaos in the country, but also, metaphorically, the end of imagination as represented by storytelling and art. Thus what Auster seems to suggest is that not all worlds are equal, but also that one cannot avoid any of these worlds and must cope and live with all, however destructive they are, that is the real, physical, violent and chaotic world as well as the world of memories, dreams, imagination and art. This manifests itself in both Auster and August, the writer's decision to leave Owen Brick in the role of an assassin, in a situation before the assassination of the writer, in a situation when Owen is unable to kill, however reluctantly, a writer, August, now because the war starts in an actual, physical world of both himself and a writer. Thus imagination, invention, and scarcely imaginable war become reality which suggests Auster's warning against the possible realization of only "imagined" destructive events such as war. There is however, a different metaphorical meaning of the situation. Despite the chaos, violence, and possible destruction possibly becoming reality as Auster seems to warn his readers, what is impossible is to stop imagination rendered through storytelling and art (because Owen Brick does not kill his creator, a writer) which

seem to be a source of value and a way out of chaotic and brutal reality. In his pseudo-philosophical dialogue on the nature of reality, Frisk, a commander from August's world, comments on Giordano Bruno and his understanding of God and reality. He explains to Owen that he is

A sixteenth-century Italian philosopher. He argued that if God is infinite, and if the powers of God are infinite, then there must be an infinite number worlds [...] There is no single reality, Corporal. There are many realities. There's no single world. There are many worlds, and they all run parallel to one another, worlds and anti-worlds, worlds and shadow-worlds, and each world is dreamed or imagined or written by someone in another world. Each world is a creation of a mind (Auster 68–69).

What Auster seems to suggest here is not only a Brunian, but also phenomenological and solipsistic position of a relativity of the existence of objectively measurable and understandable world, that is all the worlds exist to the extent an individual is able to see, imagine, create, reconstruct or remember it being a physical world or the world of memories, stories, physical reality, fantasy, or dream. This equality but also relativity of all worlds Auster and his August Brill suggest finally manifests itself in a passage in which August comments on his memories recalling his wife in the past: "...the notes make no sound, and then she swivels around on the stool and Miriam runs into her arms...an image from the distant past, perhaps real, perhaps imagined, I can hardly tell the difference anymore. The real and the imagined are one. Thoughts are real, even thoughts of unreal things. Invisible stars, invisible sky...the sound of my breath..." (Auster 177).

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