

POST-POSTMODERN CHANGE OF SENSIBILITY IN PAUL AUSTER'S *SUNSET PARK*

Jesús Bolaño Quintero, University of Cádiz, Spain

Email: jesus.bolano@uca.es

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Abstract: At the turn of the millennium, the young writers of the New Sincerity movement tried to create a new realist literature by getting rid of the destructive power of postmodern irony. The consecrated writers of the old postmodern guard, whose *Weltanschauung* was conformed to the style and the relativistic reality-processing modes of the previous paradigm, saw this change with scepticism. Nevertheless, there was a change in their sensibility when approaching certain themes. This article analyses Paul Auster's *Sunset Park* as paradigmatic example of that shift in order to shed some light on its nature.

Keywords: Paul Auster, *Sunset Park*, American Postmodern Fiction, American Transcendentalism, Post-postmodernism.

Resumen: Durante el cambio de milenio, los jóvenes escritores del movimiento de la Nueva Sinceridad intentaron crear una nueva literatura realista intentando despojarse del poder destructivo de la ironía postmoderna. Los consagrados escritores de la vieja guardia posmoderna, cuya visión subjetiva del mundo se ajustaba al estilo y los modos relativistas de procesamiento de la realidad del paradigma anterior, vieron este cambio con escepticismo. Sin embargo, hubo un cambio en su sensibilidad al abordar ciertos temas. Este artículo ofrece un análisis de *Sunset Park*, de Paul Auster, como ejemplo paradigmático de dicho cambio para arrojar luz sobre la naturaleza del giro.

Palabras clave: Paul Auster, *Sunset Park*, Ficción Estadounidense Postmoderna, Transcendentalismo Estadounidense, Postpostmodernismo.

1 INTRODUCTION

Paul Auster's *Sunset Park* begins with a panoramic view of the gloomy era that was heralded at the very end of one his previous novels, *The Brooklyn Follies*. As in *Leviathan*, the symbolism of the main character's intuitive action goes out with a bang—to use the words of Charles Jencks.¹ However, the explosions in each of those books have a different meaning.

¹ According to Charles Jencks famous words, "Modern Architecture went out with a bang" (2002: 23).

In *Leviathan* it symbolizes the end of a character's hope for individual transcendence. On the other hand, in *The Brooklyn Follies* it is equally ominous, but on a much larger scale. It is an explosion that awakens America from the postmodern slumber. It marks the end of the age of self-referentiality and non-essentialist play.

Even though convulsed, Postmodernism was a period, could be said, equivalent to Thomas Kuhn's normal science, that is, it was comfortable for postmodern practitioners like Auster. Breaking the rules became the bargaining chip and, although at first the totality of the new period was objected—as is often the case when one paradigm begins to replace the previous one—, by breaking down barriers, the new zeitgeist made many sections of society welcome the cultural reforms. The young harbingers of the new paradigm were aware that it could not give an answer to the problems presented by reality, but they felt it was right to work with its methods. The writers that followed the New Sincerity² path opened by David Foster Wallace tried to change their *Weltanschauung* through a transformation of postmodern literary devices and a new take on the use of sincerity in their writing. Writers like Dave Eggers, Zadie Smith, Jonathan Franzen, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Mark Z. Danielewski, Vendela Vida or Nicole Krauss tried to get rid of postmodern irony through the use of a writing of honesty grounded on pre-postmodern ideas. For the old guard it was difficult to accept that their—well-established—vision of reality could be refutable and that people with much less experience might be contributing possible solutions that seemed, at first, to go against what had been working for so long—the liberation of the mind from obsolete sources of authority through relativism—. However, no paradigm has the ability of solving the problems of representation of reality once and for all. Paradigms simply adapt to the circumstances; the dreams of the cultural phase that was to follow postmodernism started to collapse after the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the bank bailout, when everything changed yet again.

Auster seemed to understand that there was a mismatch between reality and the way he had been shaping it in his works. Losing the certainty of your own identity is difficult to accept, even when that identity was based on the oxymoronic metanarrative of the absence of identity during the years of postmodern relativism. Nevertheless, turning the page and adjusting to a new way of approaching reality through fiction is not an easy task. One would have to give a renewed meaning to the world through a higher authority—be it scientific or philosophical. Thus, Auster was willing to accept the crisis of the paradigm, but he was not ready to pass the baton to the new referential/essentialist ways.

As an example of the above, while they dealt with themes which are very closely related to the ones in *Sunset Park*, works such as *Moon Palace* (1989) or *Leviathan* (1992), give off a different halo of postmodernism that is very much reflected in the fact that the problems created by the paradigm of the end of the twentieth century follows a more casual pattern than in *Sunset Park*, which is more earnest. In "Loss, Ruins, War: Paul Auster's Response to 9/11 and the 'War on Terror,'" Paolo Simonetti aptly points out that "it is difficult (and politically incorrect) to find bizarre links or make witty jokes in the face of events as tragic

2 The term New Sincerity was coined by Adam Kelly in his article "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction," where he presents a blueprint of this trend that the new generation of writers of the beginning of the twenty-first century was to follow. This new drift is represented in the article by the figure of the writer David Foster Wallace.

as the New York attacks, and even postmodernist writers feel less and less compelled to humour or clever linguistic plays while addressing recent history” (2011: 18). In *Sunset Park* the shadow of the terrorist attacks continues to hover over the lives of New Yorkers, and the characters’ stories are affected by the economic crisis that shook America and the rest of the world at the end of the first decade of the new century. The story is closer to the reality of those who were suffering one of the worst moments in the history of the United States. Auster, however, does not grant them the benefit of hope. After the bank bailout of 2008, the characters are condemned to an eternal present, which is far apart from the recovery of the Habermasian unfinished project of modernity that the new generation of writers were trying to achieve.

2 IMPOSSIBLE ALTERNATIVES TO POSTMODERN RELATIVISM

In the first page of the novel, Auster introduces Miles Heller, the main character of the book. One of the first things the author tells about him is that he is a photographer. This is a huge departure from most of the main characters in the Austerian universe of writers. Miles has the need to take pictures to lessen his feeling of solipsism. He feels compelled to narrate the lives of anonymous people who have been evicted. This reminds us of Nathan Glass, the main character of *The Brooklyn Follies*, and his big epiphanic project, Bios Unlimited, a company devoted to telling the story of anonymous ordinary people. After moving to New York, Miles starts taking photos of gravestones in the Green-Wood Cemetery. This new plan is even more similar to Nathan’s project, he rediscovers people and names that were relegated to oblivion: “[t]he crematory built in the mid-twentieth century has incinerated the bodies of John Steinbeck, Woody Guthrie, Edward R. Murrow, Eubie Blake, and how many more, both known and unknown, how many more souls have been transformed into smoke in this eerie, beautiful place?” (2010: 135-136). The change to the photographic medium establishes a rupture, words give way to images. In post 9/11 America there is no desire to try to make sense of the old pervading language games. The camera is shaped into a symbol of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “transparent eye-ball” (Emerson 1998: 1075). The crisis requires a change in the narrative. Thus, moving to the intuitive action of taking images becomes a transcendentalist alternative outside linguistic incommensurability.

This is not the first time that Auster uses the camera as a transcendentalist symbol for the Emersonian transparent eye-ball. In *Smoke*, a film scripted by Auster, one of the main characters, Auggie Wren, also makes an intuitive use of a camera. Every morning at eight o’clock he takes a picture of the corner right in front of his store in Brooklyn. Another character in the film, Paul Benjamin,³ a writer who often buys tobacco in the shop, asks him why he does it, to which Auggie gives a very Emersonian answer:

“What was it that gave you the idea to do this Project?”

“I don’t know. It just came to me. It’s my corner, after all. I mean, it’s just one little part of the world, but things take place here too, just like everywhere else. It’s a record of my little spot (Wang 1995).”

3 Paul Benjamin was the pseudonym that Auster used for his first novel, *Squeeze Play*. Benjamin is also Auster’s middle name.

According to Emerson, “the universe is represented in every one of its particles. Everything in nature contains all the powers of nature” (2000: 158). By observing the changes in his street corner each morning, Auggie observes the possible changes in all of nature:

They’re all the same, but each one is different from every other one. You’ve got your bright mornings and your dark mornings, you got your summer light and your autumn light, you got your weekdays and your weekends, you got your people in overcoats and galoshes and you’ve got your people in T-shirts and shorts. Sometimes the same people, sometimes different ones. Sometimes the different ones become the same, or the same ones disappear. The earth revolves around the sun, and every day the light from the sun hits the earth at a different angle (Wang 1995).

At the end of the film it is revealed that Auggie stole the camera from an old blind woman and, probably, guilt leads him to embark on the photographic project with the object he took, making use of it in the only way the previous owner could not. In any case, Auggie’s project also resembles Nathan’s in *The Brooklyn Follies*. In the same way, Miles’s photographs in *Sunset Park* symbolise a need to connect with other people in an increasingly solipsistic society. Yet in this authentically postmodern Austerian piece of fiction, the usual “ghoulish trigonometry of fate”⁴ comes into play at the end of the book.

Miles is a young man without ambitions who has abandoned his university studies and lives in an eternal present: “[i]f he has accomplished anything in the seven and a half years since he quit college and struck out on his own, it is his ability to live in the present, to confine himself to the here and now” (2010: 6). The book starts in November 2008, and the narrator tells us that Miles dropped out of college seven and a half years earlier, that is, about four or five months before 9/11. This drop-out movement, reminiscent of Tom Wood from *The Brooklyn Follies*—in fact, Miles could very well be one of the characters in that novel—, occurs in the throes of postmodernism, at a time when there was still a future. Now, after the attacks and the financial crisis, Miles does not fit the postmodern paradigm and, even though he acts intuitively, he cannot find a way out to a state of crisis that he feels intensifying. It is a symbol of the stasis of the decadent America of the new millennium. However, he resembles Henry David Thoreau, like many other characters in Auster’s works, albeit without the speculative energy that pushed the transcendentalist forward.

Among the characteristics referenced in the description of the character are the following: Miles is 28, the same age as Thoreau when he retired to Walden Pond—and, interestingly, the same age as Tom in *The Brooklyn Follies* when he begins his similar Thoreauvian life change—. Reaching the paralysis situation in which he finds himself, the narrator tells us “the narrator tells us the following (2010: 6-7):”

has required considerable discipline and self-control [...] in order to live like that you must want very little, as little as humanly possible.

Bit by bit, he has pared down his desires to what is now approaching a bare minimum. He has cut out smoking and drinking, he no longer eats in restaurants, he does not own a television, a radio, or a computer. He would like to trade in his car for a bicycle, but he can’t get rid of the car, since the distances he must travel for work are too great. The same applies to the cell phone

4 This is a phrase used by Auster in his autobiographical work *Winter Journal* to refer to a very typically Austerian coincidence: “The ghoulish trigonometry of fate. Just as you were coming back to life, your father’s life was coming to an end” (2012: 224).

he carries around in his pocket, which he would dearly love to toss in the garbage, but he needs it for work as well and therefore can't do without it. The digital camera was an indulgence, perhaps, but given the drear and slog of the endless trash-out rut, he feels it is saving his life.

Transcendentalism is still present, but it is not a solution to the current state of society in 2008. The philosophy that drives Thoreau is, in this novel, misunderstood by the characters. At the end of the book, transcendentalism is still not an alternative. Miles is waiting for the moment to act again, but his way of dwelling in an eternal present paralyzes everything, creating a reality without a future.

3 THE INHERITED VISION OF REALITY

Miles's family is an ersatz creation: "they belonged to an artificial family, a constructed family" (2010: 21). Family instability, typical of the author's novels and also of Auster's own life, plays a relevant role in this work. In *The Brooklyn Follies*, Tom tells his Uncle Nathan: "[w]e've entered a new era. The post-family, post-student, post-past age of Glass and Wood"⁵ (2010: 22). In Auster's works the post-family era has social consequences for various reasons—usually due to the absence of a functional relationship between father and son, replicating his own life experience—which causes a certain imbalance of roles, since there is no role model to shape one's own identity. All this is reflected in the books as an absence of communication with the father figure—the fathers who went to war and remained silent for the rest of their lives after the trauma provoked by the horror they went through.

Recurrently, these dysfunctional families are the cause of an event that can be associated with a kind of rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. Emerson ascribed special attributes to children when it came to understanding reality: "Children and savages use only nouns or names of things, which they convert into verbs, and apply to analogous mental acts" (1998: 1081). These attributes are usually lost as the child becomes an adult, because he/she loses the capacity to use a pure, non-corrupted language to understand the world around him/her. As a child, Miles, in a conversation with his father, does not understand the adult world (2010: 59):

No, it made no sense to him at all. The boy was utterly confused by then, but he was too afraid to admit it to his father, who was making every effort to treat him as an adult, but he wasn't up to the job that day, the world of adults was unfathomable to him at that point in his life, and he couldn't grasp the paradox of love and discord coexisting in equal measure. It had to be one or the other, love or not-love, but not love and not-love at the same time.

For a child, things cannot have two references at the same time and this quality is lost as the rules of the different language games—in Wittgensteinian terms—are learned. This innocence is symbolically lost in Auster's works through rites of passage. Thus, Fanshawe, for example, in *The Locked Room*, does not have much contact with the figure of his father, who is described as "so thoroughly adult, so completely immersed in serious, grown-up matters, that I imagine it was hard for him not to think of us as creatures from another world" (2004: 220). His rite of passage is his father's illness. From that moment

5 Glass and Wood are the characters' surnames.

on, he begins to define himself through what he writes rather than through his actions. As children, the narrator and Fanshawe enter a cemetery where they find a grave dug in the ground. Fanshawe wants to know what it feels like inside and, with the help of his friend, he descends to the bottom, where he lies down pretending to be dead. Fanshawe goes into the grave, where, symbolically, the child dies and the adult is born (200: 221-222):

Somewhere in the middle of the cemetery there was a freshly dug grave, and Fanshawe and I stopped at the edge and looked down into it. I can remember how quiet it was, how far away the world seemed to be from us. For a long time neither one of us spoke, and then Fanshawe said that he wanted to see what it was like at the bottom. I gave him my hand and held on tightly as he lowered himself into the grave. When his feet touched the ground he looked back up at me with a half-smile, and then lay down on his back, as though pretending to be dead. It is still completely vivid to me: looking down at Fanshawe as he looked up at the sky, his eyes blinking furiously as the snow fell onto his face.

When they return home after the walk, they learn the news that Fanshawe's father has passed away. Later in the novel, when Fanshawe fakes his own death, he symbolically resuscitates the child. He renounces everything he has written because words can no longer offer an explanation of reality. He, then, decides to redeem himself through pure transcendentalist intuitive action. In *Moon Palace*, Marco Stanley's rite of passage occurs when his uncle dies. His uncle represents that intuitive action that he seeks throughout the story; It is the equivalent of the father figure. The turning point that this moment represents is evident in the novel: "[m]y uncle simply dropped dead one fine afternoon in the middle of April, and at that point my life began to change, I began to vanish into another world" (1989: 2-3).

In *Sunset Park* the passage takes place when, at the age of sixteen, Miles accidentally kills his stepbrother Bobby, two and a half years older than him. During a fight while walking along the shoulder of a road, Miles pushes Bobby, who loses his balance and falls to the road, where he is hit by a car, "crushing the life out of him, changing all their lives forever" (2010: 25). After this event Miles leaves behind the referentiality of childhood and he starts making sense of reality with fragmented linguistic tools.

4 DISTORTED TRANSCENDENTALISM

Bing Nathan, Miles old friend, is described has a modern day Thoreau with ideas directly extracted from "'Resistance to Civil Government' (1998a: 71):"

Unlike most contrarians of his ilk, he does not believe in political action. He belongs to no movement or party, has never once spoken out in public, and has no desire to lead angry hordes into the streets to burn down buildings and topple governments. It is a purely personal position, but if he lives his life according to the principles he has established for himself, he feels certain that others will follow his example (1998a: 71).

Bing invites Miles to live in his squat house with two other girls. He intends to base his life on tenets that resemble the New Sincerity ideal. In order to do this, he encloses himself in an eternal present informed by the past: "He takes it for granted that the future

is a lost cause, and if the present is all that matters now, then it must be a present imbued with the spirit of the past” (2010: 72). He abhors technology and progress, and has a small business, “The Hospital of Broken Things.” He repairs “objects from an era that has all but vanished from the face of the earth: manual typewriters, fountain pens, mechanical watches, vacuum-tube radios, record players” (2010: 73). He locks himself in the present as a kind of imitation of a misunderstood Thoreau.

It is true that Thoreau expresses what he thinks about time by saying that only the present exists: “I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line” (1998b: 1775). This is how Alfred I. Tauber explains it in *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing* (2001: 26):

Thoreau recognizes [...] that there is indeed no such division of time as past, present and future. In phenomenological sense, indeed existentially, we *are* only in the present, because, strictly speaking, only the present exists. We live in the present moment, and while the past is recalled or witnessed as artifact, that witness is experienced in the present. The future, like the past, exists only as a mental construct only in the present moment. And then the imbroglio: the present is never held on to; it is always slipping by into the past, flowing from a future never quite here.

However, the way that transcendentalism and postmodernism understand time is very different. In postmodernism, the present means the absence of past and future; in transcendentalism, the past and the future are part of a succession of presents. While postmodernism is static, transcendentalism is represented through movement. Emerson proposes living in the present, but walking towards the future.

Bing wants to undo the effects of the crisis by discarding the idea of a future, since this is a lost cause. For Thoreau and Emerson, the future is much more important, as it is what America represents. However, Bing focuses on the past. He has stopped believing in the American project. The twentieth century belonged to the United States. On the other hand, the title of the novel—in the words of Jelena Šesnić—conveys the feeling of “[s]unset as a metaphorical waning of the West” (2014: 60) at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The citizens are lost because the reconfiguration of the national identity requires going back to the roots, to re-elaborate a new construct, in an Emersonian fashion, from the rediscovery of one’s origins. Nevertheless, Auster presents characters who are not prepared to recover the project that seems to be the alternative.

Bing and Miles share the house with two women, Ellen Brice, an artist who works as a realtor to earn a living, and Alice Bergstrom, who works part-time for the PEN American Center⁶ and is finishing her PhD thesis at Columbia University. Her dissertation is a study of written and visual texts, about the relations between men and women in America after the Second World War—which is related to the theme of the silent fathers traumatized by the war—. All the main characters in the novel are artists or are related in some way to the art world. Bing plays the drums in a band called Mob Rule; Ellen specializes in erotic nudes; Miles’s father owns a publishing company; his stepmother is a university professor of literature; and her mother is an actress.

⁶ Auster is an active member of PEN America.

Alice's partner, Jake Baum, is an unsuccessful writer who teaches at LaGuardia Community College. Jake is a postmodern character. He has been with Alice for two years, and the omniscient narrator shows us that Alice admired him when she met him: "there was a gentleness in him that she admired, a charming, ironical approach to the World that comforted her and made her feel they were well matched" (2010: 93). Her pre-crisis irony, which attracted Alice so much in the past, has now turned into cynicism and anger. His postmodern irony no longer works in this era of crisis; it is out of place because it is destructive. With Jake, Auster is describing the antithesis of the qualities necessary to cope with post-postmodernity. He continually denigrates his students—mostly "poor, working-class immigrants, attending school while holding down jobs" (2010: 93)—at LaGuardia, which he says has become "Pifflebum Tech, Asswipe U, and the Institute for Advanced Retardation" (2010: 93).

Alice is analysing the film *The Best Years of Our Life*—a title that creates a counterpoint to the general tone of the novel—for her PhD dissertation. The narrator speaks about the work that she is doing and how it relates to her life situation:

when she thinks of that generation of *silent men*, the boys who lived through the Depression and grew up to become soldiers or not-soldiers in the war, she doesn't blame them for refusing to talk, for not wanting to go back into the past, but how curious it is, she thinks, how sublimely incoherent that her generation, which doesn't have much of anything to talk about yet, has produced men who never stop talking, men like Bing, for example, or men like Jake, who talks about himself at the slightest prompting, who has an opinion on every subject, who spews forth words from morning to night, but just because he talks, that doesn't mean she wants to listen to him, whereas with the silent men, the old men, the ones who are nearly gone now, she would give anything to hear what they have to say (2010: 104; my emphasis).

The horror of World War II cancelled the purpose of the project of modernity. The generation that endured it does not want to talk about it. The grand narratives that supported the project led the world to the second debacle of the twentieth century. Suring the cultural change of paradigm, the verbosity inherited from postmodernity has engendered empty speeches delivered by people who do not have a direct experience with reality, but mediated. In the novel, the narrator speaks about the children of the war, the generation that lived through that time when grand narratives still guided the actions of individuals: "a child of the war [...] just as all their parents were, whether their fathers had fought in the war or not, whether their mothers had been fifteen or seventeen or twenty-two when the war began" (2010: 158). That generation did not have the relativistic doubts that subsequent generations harboured and that have led to the crisis depicted in the novel: "[a] strangely optimistic generation, he thinks now, tough, dependable, hardworking, and a little stupid as well, perhaps, but they all bought into the myth of American greatness, and they lived with fewer doubts than their children did, the boys and girls of Vietnam, the angry postwar children who saw their country turn into a sick, destructive monster" (2010: 158). People who suffered through the war and who silently observe the development of postmodernism contribute with their silence to create a historical void. Auster knows that it would be worth recovering those silenced voices.

The last of the inhabitants of the house is Ellen Brice, who, through art, wants to find "the mute wonder of pure thingness, the holy ether breathing in the spaces between things,

a translation of human existence into a minute rendering of all that is out there beyond us, around us in the same way” (2010: 115). In other words, she is trying to build a non-mediated bridge between reality and the individual to solve her solipsism. However, that feeling that all the characters want to get rid of—each one through their own involvement in a creative act in some way or another—does not disappear even through the pursuit of sublimity in art. According to the narrator, Bing thinks that Ellen—for whom he poses naked—, even after their artistic relationship, which brings them closer, continues to feel alone: “but even as they draw closer to each other in that silence, he is still lonely and frustrated, and he senses that Ellen is no better off than he is. She draws and he drums. Drumming has always been a way for him to scream, and Ellen’s new drawings have turned into screams as well” (2010: 248-249).

5 TRANSCENDENTALIST GHOSTS

Ghosts have been a constant in Auster’s work from the beginning of his career. In *Sunset Park* they are present in various forms and they help the idea of an unattainable transcendentalism. Bing Nathan has settled down as a squatter with a group of people in an abandoned house in front of the Green-Wood Cemetery. This is reminiscent of the figure of Thoreau, who was also a squatter.⁷ It is also evocative of the nineteenth century communes that sprung from Charles Fourier’s idea of the phalanstery. Communes like Brook Farm, the utopian attempt to put transcendentalism into practice in the form of a partnership, founded by George Ripley and his wife Sophia, or Fruitlands, the utopian community founded by the transcendentalist Amos Bronson Alcott and his family. However, even though Bing’s way of life is based on the imperative reduction of needs—as Thoreau’s, or as they wanted to do in the two aforementioned communities—it is not a voluntary choice on his part. It is rather a need, resulting from the economic situation. The same goes for Bing’s civil disobedience. The Thoreauvian characteristics in this book are reflections of an empty transcendentalism. According to Šesnić, “neither is their resolve as articulate as was Thoreau’s nor is their escape entirely in the service of a romantic self-fashioning, as it was for Thoreau. Rather than spawning a new mode of life, they come closer to inhabiting the sphere of the dead, the lost and the forfeited, as the vicinity to the cemetery suggests” (2014: 66).

The characters are assimilated to ghosts because they live next to the cemetery— “[t] here is something dead about the place” (2010: 132)—. This brings to mind the following passage by Emerson in “Experience”: “[o]ur life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again” (2000b: 307). For Emerson, our perception of mere shadows makes us ghosts who fail to experience reality first-hand: “[w]e are weary of gliding ghostlike through the world, which is itself so slight and unreal. We crave a sense of reality” (Emerson 2000b: 413).

⁷ Thoreau calls himself a “squatter” several times in *Walden*, even though he settled in Walden Pond with the permission of the owner, Emerson. After making a list of the materials he had used, along with information about what they had cost him, Thoreau says: “[t]hese are all the materials excepting the timber stones and sand, which I claimed by squatter’s right” (1998b: 1793). A few pages later he writes: “I put no manure on this land, not being the owner, but merely a squatter, and not expecting to cultivate so much again” (1998b: 1796). He uses the word a couple of times more in the rest of the book.

In a 2008 interview for the BBC, Auster claims that after 40 years of economic liberalism demonizing state interventionism it is ironic that when that system collapses there is a period of intervention by the government to a scale that is unprecedented in the history of the United States. With that, he is stressing the relativism, in this case in the field of economics, which makes the absence of absolute truths lead to the disaster of the first decade of the twenty-first century. In *Sunset Park* Auster reflects the consequences of this phenomenon that turns the individuals into mere ghosts, unable to perceive—following Emerson’s words—a craved “sense of reality.” This is the source of Miles’s lack of ambition: if reality lacks sense, having a purpose in life becomes less and less relevant.

In a 2015 interview, Habermas discussed the project of modernity and how politicians speak of “our values,” which sound attractive to an audience imbued with irremediable existentialism, even though they are void. In line with Auster’s opinion, Habermas states: “We can see our political institutions being robbed more and more of their democratic substance during the course of the technocratic adjustment to global market imperatives. Our capitalist democracies are about to shrink to mere façade democracies” (Habermas 2019: 562). Then, he again alludes to the recovery of an enlightenment informed by science, but in the spirit of the origin of the Humboldt University, that is, speculative knowledge applied to the needs of the human being:

These developments call for a scientifically informed enlightenment. But none of the pertinent scientific disciplines—neither economics nor political science or sociology—can, in and of themselves, provide this enlightenment. The diverse contributions of these disciplines have to be processed in the light of a critical self-understanding. Since Hegel and Marx it is precisely this that is the task of critical social theory, which I continue to regard as the core of the philosophical discourse of modernity (2019: 562).

Still today, Habermas continues to proclaim the need to once again recover the project of modernity. The previous recovery of a scientifically informed enlightenment comes from the need to recover a true insight of the individual’s own identity. Mass knowledge leads the human being to a conception of her/himself for which s/he is not prepared. That is why Tim Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker appeal to Kantian “as-if thinking” in their seminal article “Notes on Metamodernism,” also published in 2010:

Kant’s philosophy of history after all, can also be most appropriately summarized as ‘as-if’ thinking. As Curtis Peters explains, according to Kant, ‘we may view human history as if mankind had a life narrative which describes its self-movement toward its full rational/social potential [...] [ellipsis in the original] to view history as if it were the story of mankind’s development’ [...] humankind, a people, are not really going toward a natural but unknown goal, but they pretend they do so that they progress morally as well as politically.

That is to say, even when it is well known that history—or that nature—does not serve any particular end and that it is not directed to any specific goal, people need to believe that it does, politically and morally. In order to make sense of this new state of knowledge, philosophy “must fulfil the task of rationally improving the self-understanding of mankind through arguments alone that, according to their form, are permitted to lay fallible claim to universal acceptance” (Habermas 2019: 562).

The characters in *Sunset Park* lack the tools to which Habermas makes reference. Those tools bear a great resemblance to Gilles Lipovetsky's alternative presented in his book *Hypermodern Times*: modernity should not be recovered in its entirety, since all the accumulated knowledge is impossible to reject. However, it is possible for the individual to be critical through an enlightened acquisition of knowledge, since, as Sébastien Charles says in the introduction of Lipovetsky's book, "not everything can be reduced to pure consumption [...] Certain values proper to modernity, such as human rights, are not about to collapse in a welter of pure consumerism. Other values are also partly immune to the world of consumption—the desire for truth, or the importance of human relationships" (Charles 2005: 18).

6 CONCLUSION

Paul Auster's later works of fiction represent the position of the paradigmatic American postmodern writer during the first decade of the twenty-first century. There certainly is a change of sensibility towards the themes he deals with in his novels; there is a new earnestness. However, he does not demonstrate a change of attitude towards the state of affairs. Auster continues to use his trademark postmodern writing based on a visual space created by ironic postmodern chance. Relativism still thrives in *Sunset Park*. The transcendentalist alternative, present in his oeuvre, continues to be an unattainable solution. While the new generation of writers of the New Sincerity were trying to change the world view, the old guard insisted—much to their regret—on postmodern relativism. Whenever Auster's deceiving transcendentalist characters strive to reconnect with reality, "the ghoulish trigonometry of fate" springs into action. At the end of *Sunset Park* Miles decides to "stop hoping for anything and live only for now, this moment" (2010: 308). His frustrated expectations put an end to a decade full of hopes for the future. Auster frames the decade by depicting Miles's fate against the background of 9/11: "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: 307-308). Recovering the unfinished project of modernity heralded by Habermas, trying to get rid of the eternal postmodern present to build a future through pre-postmodern ideas—in this case, transcendentalism—felt possible during the optimistic first years of the new millennium. However, judging from recent history, it seems that the old guard's pessimistic intuition was very well-grounded.

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