Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos, vol. 27, 2023. Seville, Spain, ISSN1133-309-X, pp. 19-40.
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.12795/REN.2023.i27.2

"ONE NIGHTMARE REPLACES ANOTHER": TRAUMA AND MOURNING IN THE AGE OF TERROR THROUGH PAUL AUSTER'S *TRAVELS IN THE SCRIPTORIUM* AND *MAN IN THE DARK*.

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Received 10 September 2022
Accepted 9 March 2023

KEYWORDS: 9/11; Auster; trauma; U.S.; war; terror; grief; exceptionalism.
PALABRAS CLAVE: 11-S; Auster; trauma; EE. UU.; guerra; terror; duelo; excepcionalismo.

ABSTRACT: The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 sent Americans down a spiral of fear and anger that got an immediate response in the form of some of the most controversial legislative moves in the history of the nation, as well as the military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The sense of invincibility that had dominated the American imaginary evaporated as the dreamlike chaos and anxieties of that day shaped the texts written by some of the renowned American novelists. Among them, Paul Auster with his post-9/11 texts *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2007) and *Man in the Dark* (2008), deals with the incommensurability of 9/11 through the anxieties produced by the physical and psychological trauma of two old men trapped in a room, where fiction poses as the way to escape the confinement and where matters of individual and historical memory merge with Auster's critique of the U.S. War on Terror.
RESUMEN: Los ataques terroristas del 11 de septiembre de 2001 ocasionaron una espiral de miedo e ira en la sociedad americana que tuvo como respuesta alguna de las medidas legislativas más controvertidas de su historia. El sentimiento de invencibilidad que había dominado el imaginario americano se evaporó ante el caos y el miedo de aquel día que posteriormente dieron forma a textos escritos por algunos de los escritores norteamericanos de mayor renombre. Entre ellos, Paul Auster con sus novelas sobre el 11-S, *Travels in the*

Scriptorium (2007) y *Man in the Dark* (2008) que intentan responder a la inconmensurabilidad del 11-S a través de la angustia producida por el trauma físico y psicológico de dos ancianos encerrados en una habitación, donde la ficción se postula como la única salida a su confinamiento y donde la memoria individual e histórica se entrelazan con la crítica de Auster a la 'Guerra contra el terror'.

INTRODUCTION

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 struck the United States at the heart of the country's economic and military powers. The event—which came to be known as 9/11—became a pivotal moment in the history of the United States, causing a profound trauma within the American people (Mihăilă 287). The resulting wound was, thus, physical—in the form of the vast destruction and the number of lives lost in the attacks—, as well as emotional—manifested by the shock, anxieties and fear that dominated the American imaginary in its wake. The conception of 9/11 as a national catastrophe viewed the intrusion of the terrorists into the U.S. as a symbol of the nation's entrance into the world's history of violence—being the first attack of such magnitude to happen within U.S. continental soil—and, consequently, the end of U.S exceptionalism—a moment of historical rupture, as conveyed by the authorities' official narrative of the attacks (Cvek 19). This sense of superiority or exceptionality had dominated the American ideological, political, and economic discourses ever since the nation's foundation, and had just become stronger with the military and ideological victories of the twentieth century as well as the advantageous geographical, political, and economic position of the U.S. in the world order. Yet, the 9/11 attacks—being the first event of such violence and magnitude to happen within U.S. continental soil—burst the bubble of American exceptionalism, thus, altering "America's self-identity, sense of security, and belief in its invincibility"(Nadel 129).

The official discourse painted 9/11 as the historical event that had "awakened" the nation "to danger" (Bush, "September 11"), thus marking the end of the U.S.'s prominent position in the world order, and fueling the anxieties provoked by the attacks. This manipulation of the event's significance was promoted by the U.S. authorities and the complicit mass media to perpetuate the general state of alarm that arose after 9/11, in order to promote a series of national and foreign policies in the context of the so-called "War on Terror" (Cvek 21).

These measures and the discourse of fear that fostered them played an important role in the perpetuation of trauma within the country in the wake of 9/11, thus interfering with all prospects of recovering from it:

> Political public discussion of 9/11 has been and still is (despite the remarkable 2004 9/11 Report) inadequate because of the unfortunate limits being set on what can and cannot be debated (…) Can't we have substantial political analyses that criticize the actions of the United States in the past and present, and yet welcome public discussion about trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, vicarious traumatization, and ways to help those suffering these disorders? (Kaplan 16)

Indeed, as E. Ann Kaplan denounces here, instead of focusing on trauma as a condition than needs to be addressed and treated, the Bush administration made use of the anxieties derived from it in order to promote the national unity needed to move forward in their political agenda. In such a social and cultural climate, the discourse of terror also entered the literary world with the growing fear that the author—and, thus, their work—was becoming irrelevant (48). In truth, if American's new reality—marked by the spectacular nature of the attacks and the allegedly altered 9/11 official narrative—had started to look like fiction (Kauffman 651), the question was what role the author and their work could have in this new reality.

The question was answered by some of the most renowned American authors among whom Paul Auster stands out not only by being a New York writer, but also because of how he managed to offer both a critical view of his nation in the aftermath of the attacks and the space for the necessary ideological and psychological reflection to recover from the anxieties and fear that the official discourse was encouraging. An example of Auster's focus on trauma in the wake of 9/11 can be found in his short novels *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006) and *Man in the Dark* (2008) in which he presents the healing journey of two old men trapped in a room along with their own traumatic memories.

Travels in the Scriptorium brings the action inside a locked room where a man, identified as Mr. Blank, awakes with no memories of who he really is or what has brought him into the closed room. With nothing else to do, he begins to read a manuscript he finds during a quick inspection of a desk. Soon after, a series of women and men start coming into the room, identified as his caregivers, who reveal part of the truth behind Mr. Blank's confinement: it had been his

decision as a way of punishment for the crimes he committed against the characters he himself had created. The novel becomes, then, a portrayal of grief dominated by guilt, fear and confusion as Blank's feelings and physical decline trap him in an endless melancholic cycle, as well as within himself and his room.

Similarly, *Man in the Dark* tells the story of a man, August Brill, who lies awake at night at his daughter's house after a car accident has left him confined to his bed. Unable to sleep, Brill tries to keep the memories of recent—and not so recent—painful events at bay by creating stories about an alternative 2007 America where 9/11 never happened. Like Blank's manuscript and the visits he receives, August's stories become his way of dealing with the pain and guilt he felt over the past and his failed marriage, as the novel again portrays a grieving individual, but one who finally manages to escape the cycle of guilt and is able to mourn the loss of his wife and his youth.

Although the themes of literature and, particularly, of the author have been common in Auster's works since the beginning of his literary career—and which are also central in the two novels this paper analyzes—, trauma plays a significant role as well. Indeed, the "crushing presence of trauma" (Hugonnier) dominates both novels from beginning to end, through the texts' main characters, Mr. Blank and August Brill. In both cases, trauma appears both in the physical—that which can be objectified—and emotional—that which resides at the individual's unconscious level—forms.

Though the word 'trauma' coming from the Greek *trauma* ("wound") originally referred to "an injury inflicted on a body" (Caruth 3)—that is, a physical condition—, its conception has evolved throughout history to be used also to describe psychological, and even cultural, afflictions. Indeed, talking about trauma today can be talking about a "a sudden injury that breaks through the organism's protective skin" or about "'a severe shock to the mind,' the penetration of mental defenses leading to a form of psychological breakdown" (Marzillier 4) or even a combination of the two. In both cases, there is a causal event or agent that comes from the outside, but whose consequence is an internal response affecting the body—physical—and/or the mind—psychological. This description of how trauma generally occurs mirrors the events of September 11th, 2001 as the hijacked planes became an external force that crashed into a series of strategic locations inflicting a considerable internal wound within the nation in the form of the material destruction of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and an irreversible shock to Americans'

psyche. In this sense, although trauma can, indeed, be physical or psychological, in most cases both 'types' of injuries do come together, as confirmed by Cathy Caruth in her work *Unclaimed Experience*: "What causes, trauma, then, is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time" (61). Thus, whether there is or not corporeal harm, the existence of trauma will, to some extent, always involve a mental effect. Sigmund Freud already dealt with the connection between the bodily and mental effects of trauma when recognizing that "certain types of events impacted on the mind to provoke a certain type of traumatic neurosis" (Marzillier 6), but also that the psychological impact of a traumatic event would manifest through its prolonged physical presence (Freud 245). This way, while reactions such as flashbacks or nightmares act as mental projections of the tangible traumatic agent once it has disappeared—as a way to keep the mind's protective responses activated by forcing the subject to believe the object is still there—, additionally, the body suffers a series of "physical symptoms such as headaches or nausea" (Hashim and Babaee 2) with no apparent physical cause for them. Thus, trauma can be experienced in the psychological and/or physical forms, but the responses to it will, undoubtedly, be of both types to some extent or the other. For this reason, it is the purpose of this paper to consider Auster's representation of the post-9/11 trauma and grief through the bodily and mental afflictions of his characters, taking Freud's work on mourning and melancholia as the basis for the analysis of both novels.

OLD AGE AND TRAUMA: THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WOUNDS OF LIVING.

As many scholars have already emphasized, Auster has shown a growing interest in portraying his characters as old men, as if these fictional constructions aged "at the same time as their author" (Thévenon 3). Indeed, Auster's focus on old age is now a firmly established element of his fiction and has been since the publication of *The Invention of Solitude* in 1982, which can be considered his first memoir. Since then, his novels' characters seem to have followed the same "natural process of ageing" (Thévenon 2) as their creator, combining matters of personal and national trauma and putting those at the center of his stories (Shostak 66). This is the case of Mr. Blank's and August Brill's stories and the post-9/11 context in *Travels in the Scriptorium* and *Man in the Dark*.

In his post-9/11 novels, Auster deals with the tangible side of trauma, indeed, by shaping his characters as "old men," not in terms of age—as he explains through Mr. Blank that "old" is a flexible term used to describe "a person anywhere between sixty and a hundred" (Auster, *Travels* 3)—, but in relation to their gradual physical deterioration. Just as 9/11's material destruction and loss of lives could be objectified, so can Blank's frailty or August's impairments, as shown at various points in both novels.

Out of the two men characters, Mr. Blank's physical decline is particularly striking:

> Neither bending nor crouching is an activity he feels particularly comfortable with today, but of the two he is somewhat more fearful of bending, since he understands the potential for losing his balance once he lowers his head, and he is apprehensive that if he should indeed lose his balance, he might fall to the floor and crack his skull against the black-and-white tiles. He therefore concludes that crouching is the lesser of the two evils, although he is far from confident that his knees can bear the strain that will be put upon them. (18)

Here, the normal degeneration of Blank's joints and muscles prevents him from pulling back up his pants after using the toilet, thus, making him dependent on others for even the simplest daily tasks. Moreover, Blank's fragile body not only symbolizes the loss of his autonomy, but becomes, in itself, an autonomous entity separated from his mind as shown in the following passage:

> Mr. Blank forgets that he is moving and focuses exclusively on his thoughts, and not long after that, perhaps less than a second, two seconds at most, his feet slip out from under him and he falls to the floor. (...) the pain is too much for him. It has pushed all other thoughts out of his mind, and once he begins to relax the aforementioned muscles, he feels his urethra give way to the inevitable, and a moment later he is pissing in his pants. (60)

Though Blank had been capable of, consciously, resisting the urge to urinate up until this moment, the pain caused by the physical trauma his body suffers after hitting the floor effectively puts an end to his mind's control over it. This "involuntary loss of control" (61)—that is frequently observed in the elderly—not only reflects the separation between his physical and mental selves, but also leaves Blank at the

mercy of his body, which emerges as a sort of physical prison that resembles his confinement in the locked room.

Whereas Blank's fragility appears to be a consequence of the normal physiological decline the body undergoes with age, August's seems to come from the adoption of risk-taking behaviors throughout his life as much as from his natural deterioration:

> I feel a cough gathering in my chest, a faint rattle of phlegm buried deep in my bronchia, and before I can suppress it, the detonation comes blasting through my throat (...) here I am in a full-blown spasm, my whole body convulsing from the onslaught. It's my own fault. I stopped smoking fifteen years ago, but now that Katya is in the house with her ubiquitous American Spirits, I've begun to lapse into the old, dirty pleasures (Auster, *Man* 72)

Here, the harm caused by years of tobacco consumption coexists with the physical trauma a body goes through due to the passing of time, as the normal decline worsens with the abuses one might subject one's body to. Similarly, August's damaged leg—a consequence of a car accident he suffered months before—has him bedridden and dependent on others: "I can't climb up the stairs in a wheelchair, can I? And if I used my crutch, I would probably fall in the dark. Damn this idiot leg" (13). This way, just like Blank, August's body becomes the living container he can no longer control. In this sense, whether due to the natural and gradual deterioration of the body as in Blank's case or caused by an external force like August's car accident and abuses, Auster displays, thus, the mere act of living as greatly traumatic in physical terms for the human body, conferring it the role of a material prison in which both men are confined.

While physical decay is at the center of Auster's portrayal of trauma, the characters' most vital wound is not the physical but the cognitive one. Indeed, the emotional disturbance caused by the past—whether remembered or not—becomes the most challenging and haunting experience for both Blank and August, as their physical incarceration in their bodies and rooms is mirrored by the mental one in their "own interior world made up of memories, remorses and philosophical ideas" (Rogobete 284). Their cognitive confinement—accentuated by the limitation in mobility both men suffer as a result of their physical decay and that also keeps them trapped in their rooms—proves to be the true cause of the prolonged trauma they suffer, as the constant reproduction of the past—as pictures in the

audiovisual form through mass media or mentally through the subject's memories of it—keeps the powerful negative emotions alive. This portrayal of trauma as a physical, but especially psychological condition in Auster's novels through Blank's and August's wounded bodies and minds alludes to the reality of the post-9/11 trauma that was, indeed, triggered by the material destruction of the towers, but that truly came from the rupture with an historical conception of the American nation as superior and invincible.

In his novels, Auster seems to confirm what Sigmund Freud had already draw attention to a century ago: the crucial role of memories—and, thus, of emotions—in the perpetuation of trauma by physically prolonging the presence of the "lost object" (Freud 245). Although memories are nothing more than mental images of a past long gone, the emotional response to those pictures can be, indeed, physically crushing, like August describes in the following passage: "Why am I doing this? Why do I persist in traveling down these old, tired paths; why this compulsion to pick at old wounds and make myself bleed again?" (Auster, *Man* 47) Indeed, although cognitive in form, for August the act of remembering is as harmful as the accident had been for his now impaired leg, and just as restraining:

> I was supposed to be looking at Miriam's manuscript, but here I am staring at a crack in the wall and dredging up remnants from the past, broken things that can never be repaired. (47)

Just as his mobility has been reduced due to the severe damage to his leg—which, though not completely detailed in the text, has been so significant that it left him confined to bed or a wheelchair most of the time—, the constant assault of flashbacks from his past, especially the ones of his late wife, prevent August from both physically and mentally engaging with the more intellectual activities that he had no problem in participating in previously.

Memories, thus, act as the physical, though mental, link to the traumatic past, constantly and unconsciously haunting the individual like the ghosts August tries to keep away—presences that Blank also perceives:

> The dammed specters, Mr. Blank says. They're back again.
> Specters?
> My victims. All the people I've made suffer over the years. They're coming after me now to take their revenge. (Auster, *Travels* 80)

For Blank, the specters are the physical appearances of his novels' characters, the "operatives" he sent on multiple and diverse missions and that act both as characters of Auster's novel and memories of the ones Blank included in his own stories. Thoughts, in this sense, become real, "even thoughts of unreal things" (Auster, *Man* 177).

Similarly to how the images of the burning towers that dominated the U.S. media long after the attacks were engraved into Americans' imaginary like a sort of "spectral apparition of the absent towers" (Hugonnier), these 'visits' from the past that both August and Blank receive symbolize the "unconscious presentation" of trauma in the form of "innumerable single impressions (or unconscious traces of them)" (Freud 256) left by events from their past in their minds. This way, when trauma occurs, the subject—as an individual as well as part of a collective—grieves over its cause as part of the process to go back to the previous state, or, more precisely, to recover from trauma. During this process, the individual goes through an act of "reality-testing," as Freud described, that shows "the loved object no longer exists", thus forcing them to "be withdrawn from its attachments to that object" (244). This withdrawal aims to break the emotionally trapping links with the memories of the object—which can also be an experience—so that the mere act of remembering does not bring pain, fear or any other negative feelings with it.

The subject's relation with their memories is, thus, key for the healing process to take place—what Freud defines as the "normal affect of mourning"—, but also when said process fails—what Freud refers to as a "pathological disposition" or melancholia (243). These two forms in which grief can be processed—or not processed—represent the two ways in which Auster's characters confront trauma through the creation and reading of fiction.

THE SOLITUDE OF TRAUMA: GRIEF, MOURNING AND MELANCHOLIA.

Even though both mourning and melancholia share most of their mental features—namely "the same painful frame of mind, the same loss of interest in the outside world (...) and the same turning away from any activity that is not connected" (244) to the lost object—the latter is considered 'pathological' because the grieving subject adopts a self-reproaching attitude, blaming themselves for the causes leading to the traumatic episode (251). This duality of emotional pain

and guilt also spread within the American people in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks as manifested by the legislation adopted in the months following the attacks with the focus on reinforcing the nation's security.

Whereas there had been a rush to provide an official narrative of the event that presented the nation as the victim to the terrorist evil, the Bush administration also took the opportunity the attacks had created to promote their own political agenda that included a series of measures in the name of national security. The terrorists' easy entrance to the country and the fact that they had been preparing the attacks within American soil helped to support the idea that the country's system of defense was not as strong as previously thought. It needed to be reinforced. For weeks and even months after the attacks, authorities and mass media defended the Patriot Act or the newly created Department of Homeland Security as necessary measures to prevent new attacks from happening, thus, encouraging Americans to support the new policies if they wanted a more secure nation.

Indeed, as stated in the introduction to the *9/11 Commission Report* (2004), the attacks had been "a day of unprecedent shock and suffering in the history of the United States" for which the nation had been "unprepared" (Nat. Commission xv). Through this construction of the 9/11 attacks not only as an unexpected event, but also as something that could have been prevented if the system had been reinforced with measures such as the newly approved ones, authorities were indirectly laying the responsibility of preventing new attacks on the American people in order to guarantee their incontestable support and to "establish a unity of effort" (Nadel 136) among them. Guilt—or, as in this case, a forced and imposed sense of responsibility—, therefore, becomes key for the perpetuation of trauma, pausing the mourning process and prompting melancholia, as it is the case of *Travels*' Mr. Blank.

At one point in the central narrative, the reader learns that Blank's imprisonment in the room is caused by a series of crimes that he is being prosecuted for. While he constantly wonders if he could get out of the room, a visit from his "doctor"—who, in truth, is another one of his characters—confirms Blank is the one to hold responsible for his confinement:

> You don't remember now, Farr says, standing up from the bed and taking the photograph out of Mr. Blank's hands, but the whole thing

> was your idea. We're just doing what you asked us to do. (Auster, *Travels* 78)

As the passage shows, Blank's guilt over his characters' fates—the cause of his personal trauma—leads him to take away his own liberty as well as his own memory, in an attempt to withdraw from the images of his "operatives" and the suffering they cause him while punishing himself for sending them on their missions—just as Americans' compliance with the government's restriction of their civil rights responded to the newly imposed sense of responsibility after 9/11. This way, like his confinement in the room, Blank's amnesia is nothing but a result of the man's melancholic disposition as, according to Freud, the pathological process usually "culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment" (244)—that, in the post-9/11 context referred to the possibility of new attacks if the nation's security was not improved.

Whereas at first it seems that the 'treatment' Blank is being subjected to is the cause of his memory loss, both the physical and mental improvements he experiences after taking his morning pills—when he admits he has begun "to remember" and that "his brain is clear" (Auster, *Travels* 24)—support the idea that his inability to remember is due to Blank's own wish to withdraw from the "unconscious traces" of his past, the cause of his trauma. A passage near the end of the novel in which he is forced to look at a series of photographs of his alleged victims seems to prove this right:

> Mr. Blank clutches his face, tearing at the skin with his fingers. He is finding it difficult to breathe now, for he already knows the subject of the fourth picture, even if he can't remember how or why he knows it (...) he does not have the strength to look at it. Instead, he lets the four photographs slip out of his hands and fall to the floor, and then, bringing those same hands up to his face, he covers his eyes and begins to weep. (125)

Blank's refusal to look at the last picture—somehow evoking the silenced images of the falling people from the towers or the ones of the tortures carried out at Guantánamo (Butler 40)—symbolizes the guilt, pain and fear the memories from his own traumatic experiences continue to provoke in him, as the perfect example of the "repetitive, self-referential traumatic loop" (Cvek 205) in which the melancholic individual gets trapped.

This scene becomes, this way, an allegory of the U.S. social context in the wake of 9/11, as the "over-edited images" of the burning towers that "dominated our screens and our print" (Nadel 140) and that occupied a permanent space in the nation's media for months—and even years—after the attacks are echoed by the pictures the doctor shows Blank and that send him down a spiral of guilt and suffering. Hence, Auster's novel conveys how the perpetuation of trauma—by looking at the pictures of dead characters or burning towers—inevitably leads to a never-ending melancholic cycle defined by guilt, suffering and fear. However, by choosing a doctor as the figure who brings Blank the pictures as part of his therapeutic regime, Auster opens the door to a re-examination of the role of images, not as trauma-inducing objects, but as the starting point for the healing process, that is, for mourning, to take place.

Even though melancholia and mourning are usually seen as two separate, yet nearly alike, processes, they may also be understood as two phases within the subject's healing course, as the melancholic individuals can, with time and effort, exit the cycle of guilt they might be trapped into, as "trauma can be 'worked through' even if it can never be completely erased" (Mihăilă 287). This is exemplified by Auster's other protagonist, August, who begins the novel captive in his own cycle of guilt, constantly forcing his mind to avoid the memories of his late wife and focus, instead, on the fictional alternative world he has created. August himself admits it when his granddaughter questions him about his long-abandoned memoir:

> It got too sad. I enjoyed working on the early parts, but then I came to the bad times, and I started to struggle with it. I've done such stupid things in my life, I didn't have the heart to live through them again. (Auster, *Man* 130)

Whether due to the sadness or guilt over the nine years he and his wife lived apart after his affair, August confesses to have been avoiding facing the past not only because of the pain it still causes in him, but because he would need to confront his own responsibility for it. In this sense, both Blank and August act as the melancholic individuals, trapped in a web of guilt and fear of facing the reality of their pasts, but more importantly, fear of accepting the role they played in the traumatic experience—just as Americans were forced to re-evaluate their conception of their nation and its history in the wake of 9/11.

The characters' old age seems to, also, fuel the anxieties their memories are provoking, as they find themselves facing the end of their lives. In this sense, the "small and bare" (Thévenon 8) spaces—the room and the bed—both characters are trapped in become the tangible representation of the reduced temporal space they have left, as the narrating voice from *Travels* wonders at the beginning and end of the novel: "and how long will he remain? With any luck, time will tell us all" (Auster, *Travels* 1 and 127). Indeed, the fact that they are 'running out of time' to find peace with their feelings of failure and regret when confronted with their pasts gets reflected in the powerlessness both characters experience during their confinements. Even in the solitude of their rooms, the intruding memories and the nearly constant presence of Blank's characters certainly occupy quite an important amount of time and space which contributes to block any possible engagement with their traumatic pasts. This is what Marie Thévenon identifies as the first form of solitude that appears in Auster's works, "the negative experience of a harmful form of solitude" (6) that presents the individual in a nearly complete isolation from the world and even from himself—thus, unable to confront his trauma and his grief to move pass it—which mirrored the "isolationist, 'go it alone,' or revenge tactics" (Kaplan 18) that the U.S. adopted in the wake of the attacks that both fed and rose from the trauma those had caused. However, in the process of dealing with loss and trauma, another form of solitude comes into play, the "positive experience of an auto-imposed solitude" (Thévenon 6) in which the individual can effectively isolate themself from the world to reconnect with, rather than to withdraw from, oneself, thus using this newly found solitude to make peace with their own demons from the past.

THE POSSIBILITIES OF FICTION: DISTANCING AND CONFRONTING TRAUMA.

In the context of trauma, thus, the first step towards recovery is to break all links with the traumatic experience, that is, to detach oneself from the memories of said experience, as Freud described. This is precisely what many scholars were demanding of authors writing about 9/11, as the immense trauma the attacks caused kept dominating the American imaginary in their wake, more so with the media's frequent reproduction of images from that day.

In order to guarantee a unified response to the attacks, the U.S. authorities needed to nationalize—as well as internationalize—

the event, which could only be achieved through its visual consumption by the public. The constant reproduction of images from the World Trade Center on that fateful day of September responded to a "particular hegemonic discourse supporting the internal reconstitution of the US public space and American position on the global geopolitical stage" (Cvek 24), thus becoming a central part of the Bush administration's propaganda machinery as the early steps towards the foundation of what came to be known as the 'War on Terror'. The permanence of the attacks in the U.S. daily life beyond September 11, 2001—aided by the passive consumption of pictures from that day—exemplifies the materially prolonged presence of the lost object that Freud associated with grief, and from which he believed the subject needed to withdraw in order for mourning to take place.

This forced estrangement from the traumatic experience that Freud described allows the individual to "renew the terror" caused by their past "but at a physical, spatial, temporal, and psychological distance" (Nadel 133) from which the subject can safely face trauma and heal. This way, the constant reproduction of images from the attacks in the U.S. mass media prevented Americans from getting the necessary distance from the event, perpetuating the trauma it caused and hampering any possibility of recovery. In this context, literature and its therapeutic function (Simonetti 20) proved to be the perfect space to both escape and confront the traumatic experiences, as shown in the analyzed novels.

Indeed, whereas the confinement of both Blank and August in their rooms already provides a physical or spatial estrangement from the 'real' world, the act of creating fiction is what finally sends both men in the correct path towards recovery, as described by Blank's doctor in the following passage:

> To test your reflexes, for one thing.
> My reflexes? What do they have to do with it?
> Mental reflexes. Emotional reflexes.
> And?
> What I want you to do is tell me the rest of the story. Starting at the point where you stopped reading, tell me what you think should happen now, right up to the last paragraph, the last word. You have the beginning. Now I want you to give me the middle and the end. (Auster, *Travels* 80)

At this point in *Travels*, the doctor confirms that the manuscript Mr. Blank has received is unfinished for a reason: it is part of his

treatment, an "exercise of imaginative reasoning" (80) that will—like the pills he took with his breakfast—improve his condition. Similarly, August, already aware of the therapeutic power of fiction, fills his sleepless nights by consciously creating stories that help him to keep his memories at bay:

> That's what I do when sleep refuses to come. I lie in bed and tell myself stories. They might not add up to much, but as long as I'm inside them, they prevent me from thinking about the things I would prefer to forget. (Auster, *Man* 2)

For August, fiction becomes, thus, the "perfectly safe and protected environment" in which the individual can escape from the phantoms of his past, but also one in which he can confront "his own fears and inner torments" (Auster, "Prince of Asturias speech"). Because, in the end, the stories he imagines are not there to make him forget, but to put the needed distance between him and his reality so he can, then, overcome the pain and trauma caused by the 'lost object'. Thus, for Auster, literature becomes the space through which estrangement from the traumatic object is achieved, but also where the determinants of the external world can be ignored, as Marie Thévenon describes here:

> Writing—or at least the process of structuring a story (...)—as we can see, plays an essential role in this process of reconstruction by allowing the character to regain the power of awakening his memory and thus to reconquer his mind and body which recover their capabilities. (Thévenon 11)

For her—as for Auster—, the written word offers a wide range of possibilities that allows the subject to cut the necessary ties with their traumatic past to fully and consciously make sense of the "lived world by means of the invented world" (Vargogli 2). This way, the conscious act of mourning over the lost object can finally continue its course through the subject's active engagement with fiction, as described by August in the following passage:

> Escaping into a film is not like escaping into a book. Books force you to give something back to them, to exercise your intelligence and imagination, whereas you can watch a film—and even enjoy it—in a state of mindless passivity. (Auster, *Man* 15)

For him, engaging with fiction has to be an active, rather than passive, process through which individuals can regain the control of their lives, as well as the perfect way to critically engage with the horrors of the world around them. August, however, is aware of the dangers of using fiction as a therapeutical tool in the healing of trauma and warns his granddaughter about it when she confesses to have been passively consuming movies to numb her own pain:

> What you're left with is words, and words are vague, open to interpretation. We saw it. We saw how they murdered him, and unless I blot out that video with other images, it's the only thing I ever see. I can't get rid of it.
> We'll never get rid of it. You have to accept that, Katya. Accept it, and try to start living again. (167)

For Katya, desperate—like Mr. Blank was—to forget, the only way to truly escape the suffering caused by the pictures of her boyfriend's assassination is to substitute the memories of such a horrific event with photograms from a film, something that, as August tells her, will never help her to get over the pain she's experiencing, only keep it alive. Indeed, Katya's dive into films to numb the pain of losing Titus conversely helps to prolong her grief as they act as a substitute of the real pictures of Titus' murder—the 'physical' representations of her trauma—, effectively stopping her from moving beyond it. Thus, the edited stills of Katya's movies mirror the 'over-edited' 9/11 pictures—which focused on the towers and the "heroics of 9/11," but forwent other victims like those who jumped or fell from the buildings (Lee 34)—used by the U.S. mass media in their perpetuation of the shock and trauma that would ensure the national support of the War on Terror.

This way, even though both the passive consumption of images and the active engagement with the written word may trigger an emotional response in the subject, only the latter will lead them to ask questions beyond those emotions and look for the answers. Thus, what Auster explains through August's words is that "one of the virtues of writing, unlike other media, is that this distancing leaves an interpretative space" (McKay 200) in which the subject can work through the fear, sadness or guilt caused by trauma, to finally liberate oneself from its control. This way, for the American public in the post-9/11 context, an active engagement with fiction—especially post-9/11

fiction—serve the purpose of moving beyond the official narrative of the attacks, shaped by the over-edited pictures, to explore the other perspectives of 9/11 and the War on Terror that were being silenced or ignored.

As August explains, Katya's passive consumption of images is nothing but an unsuccessful attempt to detach herself from the lost object—Titus—which "can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place" (Freud 244). This is also the case of Mr. Blank as, during his confinement in the locked room, the only contact he has is with the characters he has allegedly created for his stories. He is, for all purposes, trapped within his own fictional world, effectively escaping from his reality—which remains, for the most part, unknown—but still "clinging to the lost object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis" (244). Not only that but his reluctance to finish the story from the manuscript the doctor gives him seems to confirm that he, as the melancholic individual, prefers the role of the passive, in this case, reader:

> So why not give me one of those to read—instead of some half-assed, unfinished story without a title?
> Trause did finish it. The manuscript comes to a hundred and ten pages (…).
> I don't understand. Why not let me see the rest of it?
> Because it's part of the treatment, Mr. Blank. We didn't put those papers on the desk just to amuse you. They're here for a purpose. (Auster, *Travels* 79)

Whether the manuscript gets finished or not is not important, as what the doctor wants is for Blank to finally confront his demons and heal through his active engagement with the story. However, Mr. Blank's wish to read the rest of the finished original manuscript as well as his inability to provide his own version of the story's ending ultimately shapes him as the melancholic individual Freud described in his work. Moreover, the fact that the ending pages of the book mirror the starting ones seems to confirm Blank's imprisonment in his own never-ending cycle of guilt, one in which he will remain in a "kind of perpetual, static melancholy" (Boulter 23).

By contrast, unlike Blank—who, as the melancholic individual, will remain forever trapped in his room and in his mind—, August manages to bring himself out of his own confinement. During his final talk with Katya, he moves on to narrate the last of his stories, though

in this case, the story is not invented but real: his and his wife's own story. As a grieving individual, August's retreat into fiction—that is, his stories—throughout the novel responds to the need to withdraw from the painful memories of the nine years he spent apart from his first wife and the actions that lead to their divorce: "all those years. It makes me sick to think about them" (Auster, *Man* 154). Like Mr. Blank, this sickness August feels comes from both the loneliness and guilt he had been feeling since Sonia's death—which was, also, what lead him to get drunk and crash his car. Being both emotionally and physically ill, he is forced to stop writing his memoir, that lies abandoned somewhere in the room, somehow mirroring Blank's unwillingness to finish his own manuscript. However, unlike Auster's other protagonist, August eventually resumes the telling of his life story—though orally—when, near the end of the novel, Katya asks him about her grandmother and their time together:

> You're asking a lot of questions…
> If you're not going to finish your book, how else am I going to find out what I need to know? (132)

Even though August may not be ready yet to put his memories on the page, a night of reflection has finally led him to the final stages of his mourning process, beginning by accepting his role—and responsibility—on the decisions and actions that lead him to be separated from his wife. What Auster conveys through his character here is what many scholars were demanding of the American public and authorities in the wake of 9/11: the need to look beyond the official and greatly mediated narrative of the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror to rediscover their nation's past.

For months, and even years, after the attacks, the Bush administration promoted, with the aid of the U.S. media, a view of 9/11 "interpreted as signifying an historical break" that "marks the end of American exceptionalism" (Cvek 20). Many scholars, however, saw the event as a national catastrophe that had, also, revealed the cracks of the U.S. exceptionalism narrative by understanding the attacks as "signaling underlying continuity"—a consequence of U.S. actions and policies regarding the Middle East—(20) instead of a moment of historical rupture. Contrary to what the complicit audiovisual media were doing, literature became the space in which this "double strain of American exceptionalism" (Mihăilă 289) was exposed, as shown by the multiple works of fiction published in the

years after the attacks—such as Auster's novels analyzed in this paper—or more personal texts such as the collection *Poems from Guantánamo* (2007)[1] that includes twenty-two poems written by some of the Guantánamo detainees that exposed the torture practices they had been submitted to during their imprisonment (Butler 55).

Just like the poems written by the Guatánamo prisoners—among other things—helped Americans to look back and rediscover their nation's past and to accept their responsibility in the historical circumstances of and beyond 9/11 and the War on Terror, August's invented stories allow him to access the memories he had been avoiding, finally accepting the responsibility for his past mistakes and leaving his guilt behind. Thus, the memories of Sonia, at first the source of August's emotional suffering, become, through the storytelling act, the cure for both his physical and mental conditions: "Sonia was my ground, my one solid connection to the world. Being with her made me better than I actually was—healthier, stronger, saner" (Auster, *Man* 154). At this point in the novel, the 72-year-old man enters the final part of his both physically and psychologically healing journey and eventually succumbs to sleep, only to wake the following morning to take his daughter and granddaughter out for breakfast. August's termination of his mental and physical confinements supports Freud's claim that "a man has to be ill before he can be accessible to a truth of this kind" (246), picturing him as the epitome of the mourning individual. Through the liberation of his character from the emotional and physical prison, Auster depicts the current U.S. social context in which Americans were in the process of contesting and making the government accountable for its actions, connecting the work of recovery from the trauma caused by 9/11 with the acceptance of their responsibility as U.S. citizens to know and own their past—both its bright and dark sides.

In this sense, Paul Auster ultimately deals with the shock, anxieties and fear caused by the 9/11 terrorist attacks—as well as with the perpetuation of trauma by the U.S. authorities and mass media in order to ensure a shared national support of their War on Terror—through literature with his two stories of grief: the melancholic Mr. Blank's self-punishment tale, and the reinvigoration of the mourning August Brill.

[1] Edited by Marc Falkoff and published by University of Iowa Press in 2007.

CONCLUSION

In a world already dominated by the audiovisual format, the spectacular nature of the 9/11 terrorist attacks blurred the line between reality and fiction which only seemed to reinforce the belief that the author was becoming irrelevant (Varvogli 48). With his two post-9/11 novels *Travels in the Scriptorium* and *Man in the Dark*, Paul Auster challenges this growing idea of the writer's irrelevance by reflecting on the physical and psychological impact of the perpetuation of trauma as well as on the therapeutic role of literature in the path towards individual and collective recovery. Whereas *Travel*'s Mr. Blank is portrayed as the melancholic subject, trapped in a cycle of fear and guilt over a past he is trying to forget—similar to the one the U.S. society was immersed into—, *Man*'s August Brill represents the mourning individual who ultimately leaves his own trauma behind, recognizing and accepting his past mistakes in order to move on with his life. Shifting the focus from an "obsession with images and videos that seem only to reinforce trauma," (McKay 200) the literary space becomes, for Auster, the medium through which people can finally move from the emotional turmoil caused by the attacks and subsequent War on Terror, to work through those emotional responses or even to ponder on previously ignored matters—such as the U.S. responsibility on causes precipitating the attacks—, thus proving that neither the work of fiction nor its author are, or will ever be, irrelevant.

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