



Lacanian Trauma & Tché in Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* (2008) in the light of Jacques Lacan's theory of fragmented subjectivity. This literary piece had already been introduced as a text prone to be read as a manifestation of conventional meaning of "trauma" for which narration had a therapeutic effect. A Lacanian reading for "trauma," however, has not received decent attention by critics. By exploring *Man in the Dark* through Lacanian idea of fragmented subjectivity, this paper presents that the "trauma" for Brill is for no nostalgic return of the past. It also does not refer to one specific event which means that language helps it in no way to be subjugated. Rather, by scrutinizing Brill's storytelling, the present paper portrays that his trauma ties in with Lacanian notion of "tché" as the impossible encounter with the missed real, which by "automaton" or "repetition," that is the network or return of signifiers, cannot be mastered. Therefore, this analysis inevitably leads to the insufficiency of the idea that storytelling (narration) of the self or in Lacanian terms "objet petit a" can ever fill the "ontological lack" or the cause of "desire." Furthermore, by parallelizing these Lacanian key terms to the aforementioned literary piece, the present paper argues how the "automaton" of Brill's fragmented subjectivity in this novella proves to be contributing to his encounter with the missed real.

Keywords: Trauma, Ontological Lack, Desire, Signifier, Automaton, Repetition, Tché

1. Introduction

A search on the previous critiques of Auster's *Man in the Dark* reveals that the way he has utilized language for Brill, the insomniac storyteller of the novella, has been read as a tool for exorcising the choking unbearable thoughts of war and its consequences on the minds of characters of the story. However, a Lacanian psychoanalytic penetration to the novella tends to portray that what has been skipped in most of the critiques is the remainder of all those aforementioned thoughts at bay and in suspense. Indeed, the present Lacanian reading suggests that the more Brill attempts to ignore them, the more he seems to be trapped in the "repetition" and narrative. Rather than condemning the conventional reading for trauma of *Man in the Dark*, the present paper aims to surpass the sheer belief in the therapeutic effect of narration in this novella. Besides, when the aforementioned novella is read with a vaster horizon of outlook that is by Lacanian psychoanalytic key terms, it transmits to the idea that Brill's "repetition" embracing "objet petit a," springs from his "desire," which is the never fully realized factor for one's survival in the humanly world. Moreover, the present article strives to illuminate that story telling makes a futile attempt towards fixing Brill's "fragmented" and lacking being. In this regard, "tché" and "automaton" are applied to dig better into the concept of traumatic subjectivity.

2. Automaton, Tché, and Trauma

2.1 Automaton

To grasp Lacan's notion of automaton, one must have an understanding of "repetition." As Fink mentions "repetition" is "the insistence of signs" involving "the impossible to think" or the "impossible to say" (*Reading Seminar XI* 225). For Lacan, "repetition" involves a kind of return, a return, which does not involve the return of the same thing, for as Fink interprets Lacan, there are no two identical things, but what makes two things seem identical is the signifier as they are taken to the symbolic order that is language (*Reading Seminar XI* 223). However, for Lacan, automaton's function is independent of the conscious subject (Nusselder 93). Seeking into and also expanding Freud's theory of "fort da" and naming it "here or there"/ "presence or absence," Lacan believes that this symbolic repetition constitutes human beings as subjects and that subjects for survival need repetition. He emphasizes that "repetition demands the new" (*Seminar XI* 61). The absence of a fixed primary existence mirroring the child in the imaginary order produces an ever open gap for the subject. This absence turns to be an "ontological lack" (Ruti 484) and it brings about a centrifugal tracing (*Seminar XI* 62). Lacan also states that lack of separation from mother that is the object, brings a split in the subject, which causes "anxiety" (Evans 11). "Desire" is inseparable from "anxiety." In Lacanian terms, this is the "anxiety" sustaining desire, while at the same time "desire" remedies "anxiety" (Evans 11). "Anxiety" ties in the concept of "lack," since in Lacan's view, "lack" generates "desire" and "anxiety" is found when "this lack is itself lacking; anxiety is the lack of a lack"

(Evans 12). Therefore, it is deducible that “automaton” embraces “anxiety” as it revolves around a “lack” produced by “desire.”

2.2 *Tuché*

For Lacan, “tuché” is an encounter with the missed real that disturbs the functioning of the pleasure principle (Nusselder 94). Lacanian real could only be known “by some set of arbitrary and accidental encounter that momentarily pulls human beings out of the psychic system that mediates their relation to the inner and outer world by means of signifiers” (Nusselder 94). In other words, human beings in their minds, externalized in novels, films, and personae can only draw idealized pictures of themselves at the level of the signifier; hence, this way the system of signifiers acts as a system of mediation between the inner and outer world (Nusselder 94). Lacanian notion of “tuché” signifies the signifier’s inability to account for appearances; therefore, in order not to tumble into illusions, appearances need to be related to the real (Nusselder 95). For Lacan, the ideal world is a disturbance, the encounter to which disturbs the illusion that drives human beings. The “tuché,” the encounter with the traumatic real, occurs as if it were by chance. Human beings make idealized picture of reality. However, the real breaks through the symbolic and it disrupts the idealized picture of reality that human beings make (Nusselder 94). This makes a tragicomic situation of human beings as representative beings, “which cannot be elevated into a utopian, pleasurable, and truthful final discovery of the real” (Nusselder 94). This very idea is rooted in Lacanian split subject: the virtual subject that is living in fiction and the real as its unassimilable rest or kernel; therefore, “fantasy interfaces these two orders” and “designs the world into a desirable reality” (Nusselder 94). On the other hand, it has been also argued by Mari Ruti in “The Fall of Fantasies: A Lacanian Reading of Lack” that since Lacan believes these narcissistic fantasies are misleadingly seductive and they alleviate subjects’ anxieties about the basis of their existence, the fall of these cherished fantasies empower them to attain subjective singularity (483). Fantasy is the ego’s unconscious or conscious attempt to fill or cover over the “lack,” which is to Lacan a pivotal subjectivity formation factor. Besides, this fantasy in Ruti’s words “shelters the subject from having to accept the realities of the psychic predicament” (484). Therefore, the more one breaks down fantasies as a bar to face the challenges of subjects’ existential situation, the more psychoanalytic approach of unraveling the concept of subjectivity it would be (Ruti 484) and closer one gets to encounter with the missed real. Furthermore, Lacan in elaborating on “tuché” compares the missed encounter with the real to the unconscious cause. He asserts that both have a lost cause and that the vanity of “repetition” becomes the cause of the miss and the loss (*Seminar XI* 128).

2.3 *Trauma*

“Tuché” is very much similar to Lacanian concept of trauma as he mentions “the function of the “tuché,” of the real as encounter in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter, first presented itself in the history of psychoanalysis in the form ... of trauma” (*Seminar XI* 55). The concept of “trauma” is rooted in Freud’s ideas which date to 1890s. For Freud, childhood repressions get inscribed in memory and form the unconscious; the real events of early life form the disorders of the psychic life. What is to add about this theory of “trauma” is that, the past traumatic event through being consciously remembered by the subject could be interpreted and worked through. Indeed, Freud believes in the therapeutic and magic power of the words (Berthold 300). Quite contrary to Freud’s theory, Lacan delineates his own theory of “trauma.” For Lacan, trauma is the consequence of the “ontological lack.” Rather than being interested in traumatic life histories that could be childhood traumas or abusive personal memories or histories which could be mastered through language, Lacan takes special interest in the idea that the very ontological lack of human existence is traumatic (Ruti 485) and believes that as human beings are engulfed in language, they just through *objet petit a* endeavor to make a whole of themselves. To fill the void and the sense of lack, objects and figures of meaning which ironically strike both the feeling of alienation and ease, are fabricated by the subjects (Ruti 490). Nonetheless, they fail to master their fragmented beings.

3. *Man in the Dark in the light of Jacques Lacan*

Man in the Dark (2008), as one of the recent novellas of Paul Auster, represents an old man’s nocturnally mental journey through an unknown world of storytelling. Auster seems to be challenging the conventional concept of “trauma” in this novella by dramatizing Brill’s storytelling. He incorporates two main stories in this novella. Brill as the insomniac narrator of the aforementioned novella endeavors to find remedy for his wounded being. He thinks up stories at the level of the imaginary and the symbolic.

Brill’s trauma seems not to be reducible to only a singular bitter experience of having lost his spouse or son in law. In this article’s reading for Brill’s trauma, the “repetition” in the novella sounds to be playing the signifier’s role for the encounter with the missed real. Indeed, the novella’s force of storytelling by giving a possibility to his silence to be heard seems to be addressing the narrator and bringing him up to a kind of revelation to his “fragmented subjectivity.” His story telling seems to be more enabling him to locate himself outside his present situation to see himself. Brill at the opening of the novella gives the reason for his every nightly story making as Titus’s death and the images of that death. These images seem to have been portrayed as a system of symbolic law for Brill to make him delve into his every night story:

I think about Titus’s death often, the horrifying story of that death, the images of that death, the pulverizing consequences of that death on my grieving granddaughter, but I don’t want to go there now, I can’t go there now, I have to push it as far away from me as possible. The night is still young, and as I lie here in bed looking up into the darkness, a darkness so black that the ceiling is invisible, I begin to remember the story I started last night. 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 1)

On the one hand, there seems to be something compulsive about Brill's storytelling and that is the pure mechanical insistence of the unfolding of the chain of signifiers in his unconscious by which he sees himself governed by the pleasure principle. The images of Titus's death trap Brill in a chain of signifiers and orient him to make every night stories. Assuming each story as a signifier, Brill floats in between signifiers. In other words, these images throw him in a hole of darkness in which seeking parts of himself he is moved from one to the other as he mentions in the above passage. He is indeed stuck in a hole, a hole of which there is no way out as he 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) or as he says "... I'm in the dark, engulfed by the endless, soothing dark" (Auster 16). Brill seems to have understood the nature of his predicament. He is engulfed in language. The only tool he has to extricate himself is his chance of exploration of language. He seems to be following Lacanian idea that language makes the perceived and known world (Lacan, *Ecrits* 344). Hence, he could be said to be consuming his story telling technique as an interaction means to "explore an inwardness that extends outwardly" (Brivic 2). His journey portrays that exploration works only through signifiers. This chain seems to be there as a lasso to extricate him from darkness, yet it appears to bring neither redemption nor "personal resolution," since the choked memories are always already there with him although by storytelling he tries to forget them. Story telling for Brill brings the "object of desire" to the fore. Brick as Brill's demand and a means to approach his past could be taken as representative of Brill's "object of desire." Feeling the need to approach his real life stories, he puts an end to his fantasy making and gets back to his real life story.

On the other hand, the novella sounds to be commemorating darkness, since for Brill the world of darkness, "the endless soothing dark" (Auster 10) preferable to the bright world, can "keep the ghosts away" (Auster 10), yet in it he is "engulfed" in an infernal world of "repetition." For instance, as Brill takes the book which was supposed to be read for Miriam, he remembers lots of memories of Miriam and Richard and why they married at an early age, etc and then he very quickly wants to go back to Brick's story and he wonders why there is a compulsion to pick at unbearable thoughts and memories and make himself bleed again:

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? It would be impossible to exaggerate the contempt I sometimes feel for myself. 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. Give me my story. That's all I want now—my little story to keep the ghosts away. (Auster 10)

However, a deeper excavation into the aforementioned novella suggests that it is his "narrative existence" making his story telling as bespeaking a quest for somebody or something that he desires. What he experiences in his narrative is freedom for desire. He "desires metonymically through narrative" (Ko 47). His narrative is not for a nostalgic return. It rather serves as *objet petit a* bringing the relation to his desire and the experience of "lack" in his unconscious desire for an encounter with the real. His storytelling becomes the "rem(a)inder" of the Other (Ko 41). Neagu in "Between Fabulation and Silence: In Search of Paul Auster Effect" coins Brill's storytelling as his "clinging" to storytelling. Thus, Brill's "clinging" to the imaginary *objet petit a* does not lead to a mastered signified but to another signifier of the signifying chain and that is his life in reality. He experiences psychological realms in a nonlinear fashion and his story telling or narrative paves the way for such simultaneity of the three orders. He adores a line from Rose Hawthorne's poetry quoted in Miriam's manuscript: "The weird world rolls on" (Auster 16 and 44). This line is quoted seven times in this novella. It embraces the whole idea of the compulsory need of "repetition." Brill takes this line as an emphasis on the futile attempt of resisting against the symbolic law of repetition. The "repetition" observed in this novella seems to be constituting Brill as a subject. His "repetition" moves him toward something new as he says:

Concentration can be a problem, however, and more often than not my mind eventually drifts away from the story I'm trying to tell to the things I don't want to think about. There's nothing to be done. I fail again and again, fail more often than I succeed, but that doesn't mean I don't give it my best effort. (Auster 1)

Although he fails on and on, he repeats on and on. His storytelling deals with "the return of the need." In Lacanian terms that each subject demands something new in his/her activities, Brill seems to be demanding something new in his narrative. The fact that the return to the real is impossible creates a gap in his unconscious. This way, Sonia as a maternal existence for Brill, seems to have produced an ever-open gap in Brill's subjectivity; she has produced an ever-open gap for him which according to Lacan brings a centrifugal tracing. She, indeed, remains the cause of a centrifugal tracing for him. If narrative functions as "fort da" (KO 48), then by his story telling, Brill sounds to be making a "fort da" which is aimed at what is not there, but qua represented. He makes "the representative of representation" (Lacan, *Seminar XI* 63) as he says that although he is making a story about Brick in order not to think about Sonia, Sonia is still there:

I am blathering on, letting my thought fly helter-skelter to keep Sonia at bay, but in spite of my efforts, she is still there, the ever-present absent one....(Auster 21)

This present-absence, which has given its way to storytelling in this novella, has become for Brill the cause of desire. His cause of desire is neither "existent" nor "non-existent." It is a "psychical insufficiency" or absence in his condition (Ko 88). The cause of his desire is the never attainable wish of him. Indeed, unity with Sonia becomes the discourse

before which he is defined as a Lacanian subject; it, in other words, becomes the imposing lack and left over of the real realm.

Brill's anxiety arises when his story telling appears in the place of the object cause of his desire. His desire arises from "lack" and "anxiety" arises when this "lack" itself is lacking (Evans 12). His "anxiety" could be said is not for the absence of Sonia, but for her enveloping presence. It is the possibility of her absence which can save him from "anxiety," while this omnipresent absence gives rise to his "anxiety." It is his "anxiety" which brings about storytelling and consequently the narrative of this novella. Auster seems to be playing and repeating the "fort da" game with his plotting of the absence/presence of the Other in his character's existence. It could be said that Brill takes delights in storytelling. However, in Lacanian terminology, "tuché" disturbs the functioning of the pleasure principle. Brill in his mind and at the level of the signifiers makes an idealized picture of himself as a story teller who has the world in his hand by his narrative. In his imaginary story of Brick in the other world, the reader learns that Brill has always had love for Virginia Blaine, as he reveals it in a conversation with Katya:

What about girls? Do you remember the name of your first big love?

Of course. You never forget a thing like that.

Who was she?

Virginia Blaine. (Auster 27)

Virginia's existence has been also aimed through the story of Brick. Brill has always had a fantasy toward Virginia. Virginia in dream could equal Sonia in reality, both the never ever attainable ones. Virginia and Brick's love is the ideal world in illusion. However, as the imaginary story reaches their consummation and it enters the realm of the Other that is the symbolic, Brill's idealized picture is disrupted and this makes his situation a tragicomic one.

The object cause of desire for Brill has indeed a paradoxical nature. Although Brill moves toward it, it is always missed. Brill can just encircle around it for his survival. His lost fantasy of self sufficiency via his language is endeavored to be built up again by another nightly story. His "desire" for the *objet petit a*, makes the narrative go and his narrative reproduces the "lack" constitutive of his desire. He desires narrative for his subjectivity. Put it other way, his narrative gives him the space to exist longer; this narrative in the form of "repetition" gives meaning to his life. In the very closing parts of the novella Brill mentions that:

I see Sonia's hands on the keyboard. She's playing something by Haydn, but I can't hear anything, the notes make no sound, and then she swivels around on the stool and Miriam runs into her arms, a three-year-old Miriam, an image from the distant past, perhaps real, perhaps imagined, *I can barely tell the difference anymore. The real and the imagined are one. Thoughts are real, even thoughts of unreal things.* Invisible stars, invisible sky. (Auster 37) (Italics are for emphasis)

His story telling even transcends to the extent that he loses the border between the imaginary, which is the consequence of the non-present Sonia into his symbolic order, and the reality, where the line between the imagined and the real world vanishes and what remains, is only the thoughts of the unconscious.

Although the ending of Brill's life in his narrative is very much similar to his previous status before starting Brick's story, he and his readers could become convinced that the desire towards "the new" is not meaningless and starting a new life of perhaps repetition of narrative is worth the trouble by his reciting "The weird world rolls on" three times on the very last page of the novella. Longing something new in each of his stories reveal that "repetition" moves toward something new, which could be the never attainable one.

4. Conclusion

Having approached *Man in the Dark* with Lacanian psychoanalytic key terms that are "automaton," "tuché," "*objet petit a*," "desire," "lack," and "trauma" one can come up with the following conclusions. Firstly, *Man in the Dark* could be read as an example of literature in which one's "ontological lack" is a drastic element of "trauma." This "existential lack" provokes "desire" and "anxiety". Therefore, narrative springs. Presumably, the trauma Brill is grappling with is not mere events of war which via "repetition" could be mastered and worked through. Secondly, the present reading of Auster's *Man in the Dark* proves that Brill's storytelling cannot serve as a therapeutic technique, for if it did, at the end of the novella he would come to a final resolution or relief. He would also reveal that his all nightly stories need no longer to be told, for he managed to quench his "anxiety" and "desire." However, he emphasizes that he is in the habit of telling stories as he says to Katya that's what he does when he can't sleep; he lies in bed in the dark and tells himself stories. He must have a dozen of them by now (Auster 35) and that he can even turn them into films. The readers are given just one story of his nightly stories. His stories could like the weird world roll on. Finally, Brill's narrative seems to be a practice and a struggle for his "desire" for the non-lack. As his storytelling especially the phantasmagorical one of Brick may alleviate his "anxiety" about the basis of his existence, it should fall. In other words, since his fantasy could fill the lack that is the main factor for subjectivity formation, it needs to be broken in order that the subject in the story, Brill, encounters the challenges of his situation and the missed real. Thus, more than commemorating "*objet petit a*" in darkness, Brill seems to be engulfed by it. As long as he lives he has to "cling" to the world of narrative. His narrative acts as a metaphoric mirror for him. Assuming Brick as the virtual subject living in fiction and Brill as his inassimilable rest (Kernel), *Man in the Dark* could be regarded as a text dramatizing Lacanian traumatic fragmented subjectivity.

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