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D'un début de siècle à l'autre : les littératures du début des XX<sup>e</sup> et XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles dans leur rapport au siècle précédent

# Revisiting *The Great Gatsby* (1925) - Paul Auster's fractured Real in *Sunset Park* (2010)

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Article publié le 01 décembre 2012.

**Isabelle Van Peteghem-Tréard**

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## Introduction

- 1 By choosing *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as a hypotext to his latest novel, *Sunset Park* (2010), Paul Auster revisits American mythology and also confronts estrangement from one’s background – which was also a characteristic of the Lost Generation.

- 2 The main protagonist, Miles Heller, who lives in Florida where he cleans out foreclosed houses, falls in love with seventeen-year-old Pilar Sanchez, and shares her passion for *The Great Gatsby*. Pilar's older sister tries to blackmail him and he has to leave and face the ghosts in his past: haunted by the death of his stepbrother ten years earlier, crushed by a car after he pushed him on the road (which is another intertextual reference to *The Great Gatsby* as Myrtle's accidental death entails the fall of the hero), he left New York and his rich father who works in the publishing business. He goes back to find, for some time, shelter with his friend Bing, who has taken up illegal residence in an inhabited house in Brooklyn's Sunset Park with two female roommates.
- 3 The direct references to *The Great Gatsby*, and also the disenchanted portrayal of the American Dream in a post-traumatic world trying to revitalize a shattered pursuit of happiness (post World War 1 versus post 9/11 and the subprime crisis), form the backcloth to the story from a historical and societal perspective in a mimetic way. Miles Heller bears similarities to Nick Carraway, as the melancholic narrative voice. But Miles is not the narrator of the novel, he is one of the focalizers, which introduces an interesting difference as the reader can soon find out that Miles is a composite character whose unreliability can be compared to Nick's, and whose fate presents common features with Gatsby's. Indeed, on the diegetic level, the revenge plot enacted by Wilson, and the illusory attempt of Gatsby to evade his past, can be paralleled with the peripeteia entailing Miles' fall from grace. But the hypotextual relation between the novels can above all be seen in the way both writers explore the poetics of the Green Light as driving force and creative resolution of the human conflict and antinomies epitomized by *The Great Gatsby's* excipit: "We beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." (Fitzgerald, 1994: 184) In a post-modern hyperconscient way (according to William Marx's terminology), Paul Auster reappropriates the notion of intertextuality by turning the fictional set inside out, fragmenting the hypotext, disseminating the narrative voice and playing with the function of the narrator and the figure of the reader. In a meta-fictional way, the author explores, through multiple focalizers, the fracture of the Real.<sup>1</sup>

The place of the real, which stretches from the trauma to the phantasy—in so far as the phantasy is never anything more than the screen that conceals something quite primary, some-thing determinant in the function of repetition [...]. The real may be re-presented by the accident, the noise, the small element of reality, which is evidence that we are not dreaming. But, on the other hand, this reality is not so small, for what wakes us is the other reality hidden behind the lack of that which takes the place of representation—this, says Freud is the Trieb. (Lacan 1998: 60)

- 4 Three main aspects will therefore be analyzed: first, the mimetic portrayal of an American society in crisis, then the revitalization of the American Dream, and finally the fictional re-enchantment of the world thanks to intertextuality and post-modern strategies.

## 1. An American society in crisis

### 1.1. Failure and loss

We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
Leaning together  
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!  
Our dried voices, when  
We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass  
Or rats' feet over broken glass  
In our dry cellar (Eliot 1925)

- 5 “The theme of *Gatsby* is the withering of the American dream in industrial society” (Bewley 1954: 223). World War I had left many American intellectuals and artists disillusioned and alienated. Neither Wilsonian idealism nor Progressive reformism appealed to America's post-war writers and thinkers who believed that the crusade to end war and to make the world safe for democracy had been a senseless mistake. “Here was a new generation...” wrote the novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1920 in *This Side of Paradise*, “grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken...” (Fitzgerald 1920: 180)

During the 1920s, many of the nation's leading writers exposed the shallowness and narrow-mindedness of American life. The United States was a nation awash in materialism and devoid of spiritual vitality, a "wasteland", wrote the poet T.S. Eliot, inhabited by "hollow men" who had lost hope and faith both in themselves and in the ability of the nation to renew itself. The United States withdrew into a political isolation: regardless of President Woodrow Wilson's efforts, the Senate repudiated the Treaty of Versailles that ended the war, and the United States failed to become a member of the League of Nations. The soaring standards of living were only an illusion which paved the way for the 1929 Crash. *The Great Gatsby* foreshadows, in a prelapsarian way, the collapse of the colossus, hence the abundance of terms referring to dazzling light in Fitzgerald's novel, while *Sunset Park* seems to be the staging of what happens on the other side, once the crisis has actually taken place and only abandoned objects and empty houses remain.

- 6     Actually, in *Sunset Park*, Paul Auster explores the economic and political demise of American cornucopia by stressing the consequences of the subprime crisis in the first chapter: "Each house is a story of failure – of bankruptcy and default, of debt and foreclosure [...]" (Auster 2010: 3). Thus, the novelist takes up the last glance at *Gatsby*'s empty house at the end of the novel – "I went over and looked at that huge incoherent failure of a house once more" (Fitzgerald, 1994: 183) – by ushering Miles into a foreclosed house in the first chapter. America seems to have turned into a wasteland and the narrator plays on numerous occasions with the polyptoton "home", "homeless", "homelessness" (for example page 307). In *The Great Gatsby*, the symbolical function of the house and especially its geographical situation on the fashionable side of the bay, marks for the characters a sign of achievement and social recognition, and a symbol of integration. Both texts emphasize more the topos of the deserted house that can never be reclaimed due to an eviction that is both economic and symbolical.
- 7     The bay of Fitzgerald's novel is replaced by the park and Greenwood Cemetery.
- 8     The unbridgeable gap is clearly linked to topography as shown in Fitzgerald's depiction of "the valley of ashes" in *The Great Gatsby*, half-way between West Egg and New York. The place looks like a

gothic and monstrous world, an epitome of America's social wasteland. The ghosts of the valley of ashes are also present in *Sunset Park*'s first chapter. Indeed, more than economic deprivation, what is put to the fore in both novels is an atmosphere of desolation.

- 9 Auster shifts from the dialectics of plenty and affluence to a negative version of wealth which, ultimately, comes to highlight the meaninglessness of an objective reality and the fleeting and evanescent quality of life through snapshots or slices of reality – hence the ambivalent presence of photography in the novel. Miles Heller has chosen to be the silent witness of this downfall of which he keeps a trace by taking photographs. He thus frames the fracture of the real, which here is represented by the emptiness and the void that returns to haunt a country that tried desperately to hide its vulnerability under excessive profitability and false promises.
- 10 Yet, realism is a surface genre in *Sunset Park* because what prevails is the real as the return of the repressed. Effects of reality and proliferation of details and references are a trap, a decoy to lure the reader into this apparent documentary-like structure: “In a collapsing world of economic ruin and relentless, ever-expanding hardship, trashing out is one of the few thriving businesses in the area.” (Auster 2010: 4)
- 11 Likewise, the portrayal of a society in turmoil is further manifested by the subtle references to the international front, symbolized by the war in Iraq, which establishes a link between a troubled macrocosm from a global geopolitical perspective, and a chaotic microcosm on the domestic front linguistically signified on the page by the conjunction “and” binding the two levels: “and what can Teresa do with her husband stationed in Iraq and her long hours at the bank” (10). History and politics are indeed present, because the reference to conflict enables the author to voice another more intimate story, the relation to one's history. One could even associate this background to a form of pathetic fallacy which would induce an atmosphere of dislocation and fracture.
- 12 Therefore, in both novels, the backdrop is one of social inequalities and discrepancies as Fitzgerald and Auster confront two worlds, the affluent American society and the underprivileged classes which remain resolutely excluded from the prosperity and glittering carelessness of the Establishment. Bing Nathan, Miles' friend, who runs a

shop in Park Slope called The Hospital for Broken Things devoted to repairing forgotten artifacts, explicitly voices this clash:

Since the war in Vietnam, which began nearly twenty years before he was born, he would argue that the concept known as *America* has played itself out, that the country is no longer a workable position, but if anything continues to unite the fractured masses of this defunct nation [...]. (Auster 2010: 72)

## 1.2. Social determinism

- 13 Another element which is exploited in both novels is the waning supremacy of the WASPs and the emergence of a new American composite identity which is the result of immigration and multiculturalism. Here again, historic reality manifests itself in both novels as a symptom of a fractured society and the emergence of political fears and fantasies.
- 14 The 1920's witnessed an attack on new immigrants—particularly Catholics and Jews, but Japanese on the Pacific Coast as well—under a nativist banner which now tied racial to more traditional religious xenophobia as explained by John Higham (Higham 1963: 266). During the latter half of 1920, the gathering tide of anti-immigration sentiment was fuelled by both an economic downturn and a sharp increase in the importation of cheap labor from abroad. These twin factors, the state of the economy and the scale of immigration, regularly played a role in establishing the level of nativism in the United States. Another determinant in nativist politics was the connection between foreigners and crime.
- 15 *The Great Gatsby* is set against a rise in nativism and the fall of the self-made man, the conflation of new arrivals and unethical business practices. Gatsby's association with immigrant crime, particularly in the form of bootlegging, jeopardizes both the purity of his white identity and the ethics of his entrepreneurial uplift. Gatsby, although apparently not the child of an immigrant, is a bootlegger who associates with dubious newcomers. His illicit business association with immigrant gangster Meyer Wolfsheimer compromises the ethics of the hero's self-made success while undermining the stability of white ethnic difference. His enterprising efforts among shady aliens stages

the nation's growing suspicion of immigrants after World War I. Gatsby's upward struggle is inspired by traditional purveyors of middle-class success, such as Benjamin Franklin and Horatio Alger Jr.. However, another less virtuous narrative of Gatsby's self-making unfolds, which connects the hero's business schemes to the tainted hand of immigrant gangsters. A story of entrepreneurial corruption, accented by the language of nativism, competes with and ultimately foils the traditional narrative of virtuous American up-lift. As explained by Jeffrey Louis Decker, "Gatsby stages a national anxiety about the loss of white Anglo-Saxon supremacy in the Twenties" (Decker 1994: 52).

- 16 In *Sunset Park*, European immigrants are first replaced by the Sanchez sisters, of Cuban origin: "The problem is that Pilar is more than just Pilar. She is a member of the Sanchez family." (Auster 2010: 40) Paul Auster seems to resort to a naturalistic approach to the immigrant family by foregrounding all the clichés on the Hispanic community in Florida: high birth-rate, limited education (one is studying to be a beautician, the other is a hostess in a cocktail lounge, the third works at the bank as a teller), a primitive matriarchy (men are absent from the house, one is in Iraq, the father is dead, occasional boyfriends show up for meals).
- 17 The narrator uses embedded sentences to insist on details of Pilar's everyday life with a stress on her plight, page ten, for instance. This insistence upon economic realities is a characteristic of social realism, hence the lexical field of the crisis which prevails in the first chapter and suggests a contextualization anchoring the text in a realistic temporality. The narrator resorts to effects of realities on specific and identifiable issues in the US such as war in Iraq, the demise of the working-class in the present tense to highlight immediacy and dynamism in a mimetic function.
- 18 Angela, "the major breadwinner of the clan" (12), tries to blackmail Miles into stealing goods from foreclosed houses, and as he refuses, organizes his beating up by two friends of her and threatens to report to the police on his relation Pilar, who is still a minor.
- 19 Angela represents the daughter of immigrants who is determined to make the most of the situation and ruthlessly exploits Miles' vulnerability. Her cynicism and greed embody the new face of multi-



cultural America. The narrator, therefore, in a politically incorrect way, shatters the stereotyped vision of the melting-pot and community spirit to stage the rise of individualistic strategies for survival.

20 Once in the North, as Miles wanders around Sunset Park, he ponders over the place as the empty signifier of a cultural wasteland: "There is something dead about the place, he finds, the mournful emptiness of poverty and immigrant struggle, an area without banks or book-stores, only check-cashing operations and a decrepit public library [...]"(Auster 2010: 132)

21 But also, in a inverted movement, Paul Auster opposes to the individualistic practices of Florida the return to communal identity and solidarities encapsulated in the microcosm of Brooklyn which, as Mark Brown explained, encompasses the possible recuperation of some urban equilibrium (Brown 2007: 71).

22 Another aspect which is indeed characteristic of Paul Auster's fiction is the paradoxical representation of the alienating properties of the metropolis of New York, and more particularly western Brooklyn, which also stands as a point of convergence for all the communities, underlined by the effect of accumulation produced by the asyndeton:

[...] an extensive hodgepodge area that runs from Upper New York Bay to Ninth Avenue, home to more than a hundred thousand people, including Mexicans, Dominicans, Poles, Chinese, Jordanians, Vietnamese, American whites, American blacks, and a settlement of Christians from Gujarat, India. (Auster 2010: 80)

23 In *Oracle Night*, published in 2004, Sydney Orr, the narrator explains that he "felt like a man who had lost his way in a foreign city" (Auster 2004: 2). But this feeling of alienation rapidly gives way to a renewed interest in the exploration of the neighbourhood as the narrator gradually re-appropriates the streets of Brooklyn.

24 This element is, for example, very present in his novel *The Brooklyn Follies*, published in 2005, where the narrator chooses to return to Brooklyn as the ideal place to die. Thanks to numerous factual details about the streets, vivid descriptions of a buzzing activity, the novel emphasizes that the inhabitants of Brooklyn, ranging from middle-

class people to homeless tramps, from artists to business men, compose a picture of potential coexistence and temporary healing.

- 25 Brooklyn is often described by Paul Auster, metaphorically as well as literally, as the place of tolerance and coexistence where any people could be accepted, and at the same time, the place of enigmatic fascination where any solitary soul might feel a sudden consolation.
- 26 Paul Auster eventually destroys the idea of social determinism by creating the character of Pilar Sanchez who seems to be the epitome of success and the reversal of biogenesis, a concept which is referred to in the first chapter, page eleven. The term strikes the reader as uncanny after an enumeration of heterogeneous terms. Biogenesis "the theory that living organisms can arise only from pre-existing living matter," was coined by English biologist T.H. Huxley (1825-1895). It promotes the idea that spontaneous generation is a dream.
- 27 Actually, Pilar Sanchez's very existence in the novel contradicts this idea as she comes to embody the possibility of elevation above one's condition and origins:

How is it possible, he wonders, for a young girl like Pilar Sanchez, whose Cuban-born father worked as a letter carrier all his life, whose three older sisters dwell contentedly in a bog of humdrum daily routines, to have turned out so differently from the rest of her family? (Auster 2010: 11)

- 28 She re-enacts the American Dream in a sociological and in a philosophical way.

## 2. Revitalizing the Dream

### 2.1. Pilar's determination: from idem-identity to ipse-identity

- 29 Pilar Sanchez's portrayal can be analyzed as a philosophical representation of the concepts of ipseity and sameness and the encoding of time by the narratives as developed by Paul Ricœur in *Oneself as Another* (*Soi-même comme un autre*, 1990).

- 30 Following the distinction in Latin between *idem* and *ipse*, Ricœur holds that the self's *idem*-identity is that which gives the self, among other things, its spatiotemporal sameness. Its *ipse*-identity is what accounts for its unique ability to initiate something new and imputable to a self, be it oneself or another, as agent. Without both sorts of identity there is no self. Because a self has both an *idem*-identity and an *ipse*-identity, it inhabits two irreducible orders of causality, namely, the physical and the intentional orders. A comprehensive account of any genuine action must express the way it is related to both of these orders.
- 31 In the novel, the narrator unfolds a dialectics of discordance and concordance in the depiction of her character. Indeed, there is some discordance in Pilar's *idem*-identity or sameness – which would be her biological and social roles – told in a very humorous tone to express her willpower. There is an accumulation of negations and derogatory style whenever referring to babies to voice her refusal to fit into a certain mould of the Hispanic woman breeding kids: she is clearly not interested in procreation which she regards as a form of imprisonment. Her stance highlights the opposition between the wishes of the individual and the relation to the community and her duties.
- 32 She is depicted by verbs evoking her desires to highlight her strong will and determination but also her isolation because of her refusal to comply with the norm. She tends towards *ipse*-identity: subjectivity, singularity, individuality. She rejects desubstantialization and archetype as a form of determinism. Autonomy is here a crucial concept: “She needs time to be alone and to study, she wants to make something of herself, and how can she do that if she's busy changing dirty diapers?” (Auster 2010: 10).
- 33 Her ambition can be seen as the opposite to Myrtle Wilson's vulgar aspirations in *The Great Gatsby*. She equally embodies dynamism and determination at the beginning of the novel: “but there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering.” (Fitzgerald 1994: 26). She dies run over by Gatsby's car on the highway in the valley of ashes which is the nadir of hope and social metamorphosis. Her death symbolizes the wreckage of the American Dream and the impossible inclusion into the Es-

tablishment. Contrary to Pilar, Myrtle Wilson cannot escape the trap of sameness and dies like a dog.

34 Hence, ipseity as recognition of difference in the other is the basis of Miles' fascination for Pilar. It is manifested in the kept promise and the idea that human beings cannot be reduced to a social function.

35 The narrator also marvels at the power of education to achieve the American Dream, hence the insistence on school results and tests (the SAT) and reforms in the US such as Brown versus Board of Education which is mentioned page eleven. The 1954 Supreme Court decision stated the end of segregation in American schools: the reference to the landmark ruling appears here as a means to evoke the evolution of the US as a multi-cultural society and the gradual erasure of a legal framework of segregation. It epitomized the possibility for the minorities to climb the social ladder and have access to university thanks to equal opportunities and a reversal of the original structure.

36 This shift from passive to active, from object to subject, is also devised in the novel thanks to the metamorphosis of Miles Heller which Pilar helps achieve.

## **2.2. Miles's shift from nihilism to puppet-master and back**

37 The existentialism of Miles Heller is rooted in Nietzsche's nihilism: a "strong" or creative individual nihilism presents a liberating opportunity to take responsibility for meaning, to exercise creativity by transvaluing values, establishing a new order of rank. Nihilism stands the ultimate meaning of the moral point of view, its life-denying essence, and it reconfigures the moral idea of autonomy so as to release the life-affirming potential within it.

38 In the first chapter, Miles Heller stands as the silent witness of the demise of the American Dream, the collapse of the financial and personal capital being gradually disseminated. He deliberately decided to live the life of a semi-hermit in a state of near deprivation, this ascetic stance being also a typical way for Austerian heroes to expiate for their faults. Charles Grandjean explains that despoliation is a learning process in the novelist's works (Duperray 1995: 157). This

posture also reminds the reader of a Transcendentalist vision of society.

- 39 It reflects an inverted downwards movement from Jay Gatsby's ascent while Miles' aloofness evokes Nick Carraway's distanced point of view: "I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life." (Fitzgerald 1994: 36). Nick's narration actually encompasses all the ambiguities of the neutral observer as he quickly shifts from the status of silent witness to the one of puppet-master controlling diegesis and representation.
- 40 It can thus be perceived as the attempt at re-appropriating the void either through story-telling for Nick or photography for Miles: "By now, his photographs number in the thousands ..." (Auster 2010: 5).
- 41 Indeed, Miles belonged to the upper-class and has decided to become an outcast. He has fallen socially and geographically as evoked by his flight southwards and his estrangement from his father. But the weight of guilt for his brother's death is lifted by the appearance of Pilar in his life.
- 42 Miles metamorphoses from a spectator to an actor in charge. His determination for Pilar to enter some Ivy-League college stands in contrast with his own under-achievement and shows a reversal in the structure from passive to active in the process. He becomes a Pygmalion-figure, like the sculptor in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Yet, Miles fulfills a dubious paternal function which can remind the reader of Humbert Humbert's attempts at educating Lolita in Vladimir Nabokov's novel because, as he marvels at her intelligence, he is drawn to her sexually notwithstanding the age gap.
- 43 Both *Sunset Park* and *The Great Gatsby* function as quests reminiscent of the Bildungsroman, as tales of initiation. The novels offer a very pessimistic outcome and a return to nothingness. Miles does not learn from experience and his story is characterized by fractures. The final movement offers a gloomy return to homelessness, while Miles crosses Brooklyn Bridge to go back to Manhattan, where he faces imprisonment for having attacked a policeman: "they are all homeless now [...]" (307).
- 44 The dialectic of *Sunset Park* thus reflects the impossible escape from one's fundamental human flaw, as in *The Great Gatsby*. Yet, the inex-

orable return to emptiness also extols the only possible re-enchantment of the world through fiction.

### 3. Fictional re-enchantment and post-modernity

My whole adulthood has been spent writing stories, putting imaginary people into unexpected and often unlikely situations... but the real is always ahead of what we can imagine. No matter how wild we think our inventions might be, they can never match the unpredictability of what the real world continually spews forth. (Auster 1992: 180)

#### 3.1. The specular function of intertextuality

- 45 What is characteristic and symptomatic of Paul Auster's novels is the mise en abyme of the act of writing and creating which haunts his work and forms a real thread. There is indeed a primacy of the symbolic, of language and literature, holding a mirror to themselves.
- 46 François Gavillon explains that several protagonists are writers who record, translate, publish, and preserve. Beyond fiction, Auster's art is always endocentric (Gavillon 2000: 183). In *Sunset Park*, many characters are linked to the world of books. For example, Morris Heller, Miles' father, is a publisher and two of his friends are famous novelists. They highlight the posture of the writer and the fundamental stake of writing. It then raises a crucial question as to the power of a witness on a language that ultimately fails to achieve meaning.
- 47 The metatextual dimension stems from this query about the possibility of representation and the art of quotation and intertextual references might appear as some playful answer: masks are accumulated, destinies swerve and voices are both multiplied and disseminated as shown in the very structure of *Sunset Park*.
- 48 Indeed, the novel is divided into four parts. The first one is dedicated to *Miles Heller*, the second to *Bing Nathan and Company*, the third to *Morris Heller*, and the final one to *All*. Therefore, in a very fragmented

way, the story is perceived through the internal focalization of all the protagonists, which entails both a feeling of discontinuity and continuity because of echoes and parallels with each vision. This form also stresses the dialogic organization of the novel in which a multitude of voices can be heard and it builds an effect of distancing which, to a certain extent, helps overcoming the anguish of some primordial loss. This great cathartic game could be perceived as both integrating and liberating (Picard 1986: 210).

49 It thus poses the question of authority and more specifically the complex and heterogeneous identity of the author and his/her powers on language to tackle the real, what is impossible to express but always comes back to haunt Miles, Morris, Ellen...The incidents or accidents in their lives which trigger a chain reaction and prompt action are also metalinguistic devices in the text. They offer a pattern of repetition and *différance* to use Derrida's terminology. *Différance* is the difference that shatters the cult of identity and the dominance of Self over Other. *Différer* (to differ) is to not be identical but also to postpone (to defer). It is the fight against frozen meanings and the displacement of signifying signifiers to the fringe, since there is no organizing, original, transcendental signified. The writing of *différance* refers to itself, because it breaks with the concepts of signified and referent. The emphasis on the theme of writing functions as an antidote against idealism, metaphysics and ontology. Derrida explained that difference is a game, a strategy, a movement (Derrida 1968: 47-52).

50 So *différance* in *Sunset Park* is not only structural in the ruptures of the plot and the strategy of postponement of the unfolding of the story through various embedded analepses, it is also linguistic in devices of accumulation and amplification. It can also appear in the intricate sentences forming a labyrinth into the characters' psyche. For example, page 178, there is a sentence which flows across three pages describing Morris Heller's observation of his son and imitating the stream of consciousness and blending objective details of Miles' reality with literary elements and references to Sherlock Holmes and Walt Whitman. Morris Heller hides to watch his son and takes up various disguises, thus staging himself as a fictitious character, the Can Man (179). This embedded construct evokes the way Jay Gatz made up the character of Gatsby.

- 51 Another example of this strategy can be seen in the return of Mary-Lee, Miles' mother. She is a famous actress who comes back to New York to act as Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days*. There is a reflection on Beckett's language and an imitation of the playwright's tricks and complexity foregrounding nonsense and vacuity: "the formidable challenge will be to hold forth, within these constricted emplacements for an hour and a half, delivering what amounts to be a sixty-page monologue [...]" (187). The character of Winnie is literally buried on stage but this progressive interment is also that of meaning, purpose and theatre in a hyperconscient way. William Marx explains that contemporary literature has adopted a specular or mirror-like posture to reach the ultimate stage, that of a suicidal will of demolition (Marx 2005: 171). He calls this new form the literature of farewell, an art that has decided not to believe in itself any longer. Literature in itself forms a memory, some nostalgia within the novels.
- 52 This is the case with *The Great Gatsby* in *Sunset Park*. Fitzgerald's novel is about a requiem for a dream, the emergence of a new poetics, the green light mentioned in the book as "the orgasmic future" (Fitzgerald 1994: 184).

### 3.2. The ambiguous powers of the narrator

- 53 Within the novel, story-telling is a means for the narrator to retrieve the green light, to suspend reality and re-create the fairy-tale.
- 54 The story unfolds in an analeptic mode, underscoring the fundamental split between the I -narrating and the I - narrated, between Carraway the narrator and writer and Carraway the young man dazzled by Gatsby's magnificence, a candid who no longer exists and can only be a construct, a signifier of the real.
- 55 Gatsby's story is disseminated and has to be re-organized through various recollections and impressions of characters such as Tom Buchanan. Related tensions inform the act of face-to-face narration as well. The occasional "magic" of the living human voice is itself threatened by disjunctures of all kinds and an irretrievable gap in meaning.



- 56 Likewise, the act of reading – opening a book, perceiving words and sentences, turning pages, suspending “disbelief” – is an indispensable part of the process by which fiction manages to make any meaning at all. Michel Picard analyzes the new game between the reader and the text which is more reflexive and interpretative (Picard 1986: 213).
- 57 *The Great Gatsby* is structured to elicit in the reader, through the process of reading, a condition that approaches Nick's intermittent “state of enchantment” in relation to Gatsby, or Gatsby's in relation to Daisy. Of course such a state depends upon many transformations beyond the conversion of letters into words.
- 58 The self-reflexive pattern of Nick's belief and disbelief manifests itself in the presence of various storytellers. For example, Nick's difficulties listening to stories by Daisy, Gatsby, Jordan, or Myrtle are analogous to a problem encountered by every reader (or writer) of fiction: the problem of sustaining the transitory state of enchantment. For Nick to sustain his illusion as a listener requires his imaginative or emotional disengagement from the smirk that betrays the voice, the smile that eventually vanishes, the storyteller who becomes more tempting than the story, the coercive and vitiating presence of the warm breath that pours the story over the listener.
- 59 Marie-Agnès Gay explains that Fitzgerald deliberately undermined his narrator's reliability by stressing the partial view granted by the protagonist (Gay 2000: 113).
- 60 In *Sunset Park*, Pilar Sanchez directly comments upon the power of the homodiegetic narrator in *The Great Gatsby* who controls the reader's whole perception of the story.

The book depends on Nick. If the story had been told by an omniscient narrator, it wouldn't work half as well as it does.

*Omniscient narrator.* She knows what the term means, just as she understands what it is to talk about *suspension of disbelief*, *biogenesis*, *antilogarithms*, and *Brown v. Board of Education*. (Auster 2010: 11)

- 61 This element operates as some meta-narrative stressing the function of the narrator and is clearly a post-modern artifice turning the set inside out. It actually introduces a pause in the suspension of disbelief and undermines the mimetic function. The reader is no longer

reading a story but being involved in the ontological questioning of the narrative voice as the prevailing one, which brings our attention to the position of narrators and their demiurgic functions.

- 62 Pilar thus points to the *trompe-l'œil* technique at play within Fitzgerald's text from the beginning, as shown indeed in the deceiving title proving that Gatsby, albeit the eponymous character, is a creation with the epithet great that magnifies the character and erects him to the status of legend: "the most important character in the book was not Daisy or Tom or even Gatsby himself but Nick Carraway." (Auster 2010: 10). Pilar also analyzes the other characters of the novel in an enumerative way to insist on their flatness which is also a reflexive process to question characterization in *Sunset Park* and the possibility that Pilar Sanchez or Miles Heller might be flat characters themselves.
- 63 The narrator insists on the naïve quality of Pilar's voice to create an effect of reality and authenticity because of the simplicity of her language, that of common sense, and at the same time, he highlights the depth of her statement questioning in a metadiegetic way the choices made by the author Paul Auster of an omniscient narrator. The reader may thus wonder whether *Sunset Park's* omniscient narrator is efficient here, as opposed to the choice made by Fitzgerald and what are the effects entailed by such a decision. It actually brings a more distanced and less homogeneous view but also enables the novel's dialogic representation by shifting into the minds of multiple focalizers. Therefore, the narrative instance seems to vanish and fade to foreground a polyphonic and fragmented vision.
- 64 Pilar Sanchez and Miles Heller evoke the suspension of disbelief, the temporary acceptance as believable of events or characters that would ordinarily be seen as incredible. This term was coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817 with the publication of his *Biographia literaria*. Of course, this metafictional reference written in italics stresses the metaleptic process by graphically highlighting another communication between the inside and the outside of fiction, between the plot and the literary construct. As defined by Genette, metalepses are "deliberate transgression of the threshold of embedding" resulting in intrusions that disturb the distinction between levels (Genette 1988: 88). Genette also argues that not only is metalep-

sis a violation of the separation between syntactically defined levels, but also a deviant referential operation, a violation of semantic thresholds of representation that involves the beholder in an ontological transgression of universes and points toward a theory of fiction.

- 65 The interruption brought by the enumeration in italics actually destroys the suspension of disbelief in *Sunset Park* and stands in sharp contrast with the realistic elements disseminated to form the background to the story.
- 66 This frame break is characteristic of Paul Auster's fiction and indicates the impossible porosity of boundaries between fiction and reality because everything ultimately appears as an illusion, but it suggests the possibility for fiction to represent the fractures of the Real.

## Conclusion

- 67 In *Sunset Park*, Paul Auster stages once again a choric representation of a post-traumatic America whose fragments can only be put together by the art of fiction. He resorts to all the tricks of post-modern writing such as dissemination, fading of the characters, deconstruction to point to the ability of modern writing to self-interpretation which constitutes the main textual difference with *The Great Gatsby*. He uses the structure of postponement and repetition to show the unbridgeable gap between the subject and reality, language and meaning, thus stressing the fracture of the real as a poetic trope.
- 68 Critic Mark Brown explained in 2007 that the impact of 9/11 on Auster's world had so far been tangential (Brown 2007: 192). Yet, he noted that Paul Auster had been a vocal spokesman for his city and its inhabitants after the attacks and that the novelist had traveled a long way from the belief that language could only struggle to memorialize that which had been lost, that walking the streets of New York could merely create emptiness.

[...] 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, and from now on, he tells himself, he will stop hoping

for anything and live only for now, this moment, this passing moment, the now is here and then not here, the now is gone forever.

- 69 Indeed, although the novel was published nine years after 9/11, the collapse of the towers appears in a subliminal form in the body of the text through effects of reality on the international conflict or economic recession. But in the excipit, the reference becomes explicit and the structure of repetition of the nominalized “missing” highlights the never-ending process of loss, of absence as a linguistic presence and enduring phenomenon. This can be paralleled with Nick Carraway’s return to Gatsby’s empty house and his remark on the vanished trees of the new world: “Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams.” (Fitzgerald 1994: 184).
- 70 Auster depicts a crepuscular world in perpetual mourning able to achieve temporary wholeness and convergence in the microcosm of the house in Sunset Park, only to be evicted again of paradise and watch “the orgasmic future that year by year recedes before us.” (Fitzgerald 1994: 184). The final common point with *The Great Gatsby* is ultimately encapsulated in the relation to time which the accidents of life ultimately disrupt.

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<sup>1</sup> The Lacanian concepts of real, imaginary and symbolic are the structures of the psyche that control our desires and constitute the three orders of the inter-subjective world, as theorized by Lacan. The concept of the imaginary indicates both the capacity to form images and the alienating effect of identification with them, as in the mirror-stage. The symbolic is primarily the order of Culture and language; this is the order into which the Subject is inserted or inscribed thanks to the Œdipus complex and submission to the Name of the Father. It is the social world of linguistic communication, inter-subjective relations, knowledge of ideological conventions, and the acceptance of the law (also called the "big Other"). The real is not synonymous with

external or empirical reality, but refers to that which lies outside the Symbolic and that which returns to haunt the subject in disorders like psychosis.

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### Français

Le choix de *The Great Gatsby* (1925) comme hypotexte pour son dernier roman *Sunset Park* (2010) permet à Paul Auster de revisiter la mythologie américaine mais également d'affronter le thème de l'aliénation du sujet vis-à-vis de son milieu. Le romancier américain se réapproprie la notion d'intertextualité en montrant l'envers du décor du texte de fiction, en fragmentant l'hypotexte, en disséminant l'instance narrative et en jouant avec la fonction du narrateur et celle du lecteur. De manière métafictionnelle, l'auteur explore, grâce à une myriade de focalisateurs, la fracture du réel. Cet article se consacre à trois aspects principaux : tout d'abord le portrait mimétique d'une société américaine en crise, puis la revitalisation du rêve américain, enfin le ré-enchantement fictionnel du monde grâce à l'intertextualité et aux stratégies postmodernes.

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