Configuration of Self-Mythology through Trauma Studies in Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude*

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Abstract

Auster's first novel *The Invention of Solitude* was significant, in that it not only catalogued his own experiences, but also provided one of the earliest examples of the psychological processes involved in trauma and memory storage. It demonstrates the self's psychological use of the Ego, in a classical sense, to negotiate between emotional response and reality, in order to create meaning around a set of events. More specifically, the death of Auster's father operates as a catalyst for the author's journey of self-discovery, which is richly tied to the psychoanalytical principles of Freud and Lacan, and which ultimately allows him to fully appreciate his experience of loss, by supporting the wish fulfillment related to his relationship with his father, and his need to understand the rejection he perceives suffering as a child. This highlights the difference between the inner child's ego-centric or narcissistic perception, and the adult's ability to rationalize, especially as it relates to memory and unfulfilled need.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Everyone experiences trauma, however, the way they handle that trauma is unique, and irreversibly connected to their other life experiences, their memories, and their personal psychological process. This is visible in Paul Auster's memoir *The Invention of Solitude,* which was not only his first major work, but also one of his most influential, in terms of trauma studies, and understanding the impact of trauma on the individual. More specifically, the story, while autobiographical in nature, is heavily laced with psychological theory, and questions the nature of trauma and relationships, as they

relate to the creation of self-myth. More specifically, the configuration of self-mythology occurs through trauma studies within the text, as it relates to Freud and Lacan, and their theories of self.

Auster's memoir, which is ultimately predominantly a journey of self-discovery, is catalyzed by the death of Auster's father. This familial trauma could not be described as a primary focus of the work, but rather, as a springboard for Auster to enter into the discussion of his major themes, which include fatherhood, memory, and the creation of self (Righi, 2015: 19). The text is almost essay-like in nature, stopping short of a stream-of-consciousness style, but most certainly taking place in unconscious motivation, or the conscious discussion of unconscious behaviors (Roger, 2004: 1). As such, it is pertinent to analyze the role of the "I" within the text, as it relates to Ego, and the creation of self-myth, especially during trauma.

2. Review of the Literature
2.1. Trauma Studies

Trauma has its foundation in the Greek word "trauma", which is "to wound" and was originally used to describe an injury of the body (Caruth, 1995: 3). However, it has been extended, in English to refer to not only physical, but likewise psychological trauma. More specifically, one of the earliest definitions applied in trauma studies, Lenore Terr, who did the first longitudinal study of traumatized children, defined trauma as stimulus that "occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming, intense emotional blow, or series of blows, assaults the person from the outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become information in the mind (Terr, 2008: 8). From a psychoanalytical perspective, Freud, defined trauma as stimulus that surpasses a psychological barrier, such that it can "provoke a very extensive disturbance in the workings of energy of the organism" ("Beyond the Pleasure Principle 34). Similarly, Caruth describes it as a "breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (1995: 3).

However, this breach of the mind is complex, and should not be seen only as an externally inflicted wound. While the stimulus is external, the processing of the stimulus is internal. Vand der Kolk defined this complex co-dependency by stating

that "Traumatization occurs when both internal and external resources are inadequate to cope with a perceived external threat" (1989: 393). As such, what is traumatizing is different for each person, and specific to their personal resources and coping abilities, such that one individual may be traumatized by an experience that another individual could easily weather.

Trauma is also, frequently connected to memory. Generally, the way that things are remembered, or how memory is stored, is impacted by stress, and the impact of trauma. The images, emotions, and perceptions that are tied to trauma do not get stored like other memories, but rather continue to affect behavior beyond the moment, and are stored in a way that is more vivid than a standard memory (Le Doux, 1997: 68). More specifically, evidence indicates that those memories, which are tied to trauma are more deeply imbedded in the brain, and so are remembered longer, and with greater, through potentially less accurate, detail than most stored memory (Le Doux, 1997: 68).

Further, evidence suggests that these memories are stored without words (Whitehead, 2011: 1440). As such, going through the process of putting the experience "back into words" may provide healing, or lessen the psychological side effects of the trauma Whitehead, 2011: 1442). This includes re-experiencing the trauma, or allowing stimulus to trigger a recurrence of the stress related to the experience (Ehlers, Hackmann, & Michaels, 2004: 403). In addition to placing the trauma back into words, it is also useful to explore what is now known, which was not before, or to incorporate new information into the memory of the trauma, using "I now know" statements (Ehlers, Hackmann, & Michaels, 2004: 403).

Based on these studies, it is clear why trauma and memory studies, together, are a field that is growing in interest and popularity. They are widely considered complimentary, because of the pathological process of remembering, and the way that we process and remember trauma. More specifically, any lifetime trauma can be understood, not only as it is experienced, but also as it is retrospectively perceived. More specifically, according to Caruth, traumatic events are "unbearable in their horror and intensity" and so "they often exist as memories that are not immediately recognizable as truth" (1995: i). As a result, they are best analyzed, or understanding is gained, not from immediate or straightforward analysis of facts, but rather through

a "process of discovery" that explores memory and seeks to understand consciously what was stored unconsciously (Caruth, 1995: 1).

2.2. Self-Myth

Self-mythologizing is a process, defined by Tad Waddington as creating in yourself a hero, by viewing in oneself the traditional heroic qualities, when facing every obstacle (2009: 1). He uses Odysseus as the quintessential example of a man mythologized, because he increased his greatness to meet every challenge, and so by demanding greatness of himself, he in fact became a greater man. The term was actually first employed by Carl Eisteien who referred to a "private myth" which was used psychoanalytically to consider parts of the human persona, that were tied to their own experience, and the way that they view their performance, or development, during that experience, especially as it related to art (Feinstein, & Krippner, 1989: 111). These personal myths serve the same function, in one's own life that cultural myths perform in society (Warmoth, 1965: 18).

Joseph Campbell described the functions of a myth, stating that myths are a means of understanding, or establishing a connection between the current and the past (1988: 9). When the connection is lost, or is not understood, individuals will respond to a psychological need to either rediscover existing myths, or creates their own myths that serve a greater purpose. In doing so, they provide a means of explaining, or dealing with, our individual realities (Campbell, 1988: 19). In keeping with this idea, Campbell defines the four most basic functions of the myth: to give a sense of wonder and mystery to routine happenings in the universe, or to explain life's mystery, to explain how the world works, or the science of experience, to fill a sociological need, or to validate our own sense of belonging, and confirm the social order of which we are a part, and finally, to function pedagogically, or in order to teach a lesson (Campbell, 1988: 38).

Bearing these functions of the myth in mind, a connection can be made between self-myth and psychoanalysis, as it relates to generating a sense of identity, and creating meaning about one's own existence. Krippner states that self-myth informs the development of personality, by helping individuals learn from personal experiences or categorize traumatic experience in a meaningful way (2009: 7).

2.3. Psychoanalysis

In order to understand how Auster engages with psychoanalysis, especially as it relates to his creation of his own self-myth, the practice of psychoanalysis must be defined. The study and practice of psychoanalysis, as it relates to human behavior, was created by Sigmund Freud (2003: 1). He theorized that everything a person mentally experiences or behaviorally exhibits, including dreams, personality traits, and subconscious acts can be psychologically analyzed, or broken down and understood. He developed three specific branches of the self, known as the id, ego and superego, to describe various features of an individual's psyche (1923: 1). More specifically, an individual's id controls primitive and instinctual desire. This includes sexuality, aggression and defense, as well as other instinctive needs and responses. The super ego is the individual's moral compass, or the part of the psyche that is socially driven, and which determines what the individual feels is right and what they believe is wrong. Finally, the ego is the element of the psyche that mediates between reality and fantasy, or between narcissism and reason, in order to ensure that the individual can make rational decisions (Freud, 2003: 1). Freud uses the id, ego and superego as the basis for psychoanalysis, and defends the belief that an individual, or in the case of literature a character, can be analyzed, based on their personality traits, actions, and emotions, facilitating the understanding of the individual's personal psychological state, and related reactions (2003: 1).

More recently, Jacques Lacan has worked to expand upon Freud's framework for psychoanalysis (2007: 1). He extended Freud's theory, by stating that the id, ego, and super ego act in direct response to man's needs, demands and desires. As such, what drives an individual's emotions, behaviors, and personality traits is their personal needs, or what they perceive as needing from others (Lacan, 2007: 17). This is primarily tied to a need to feel validated, recognized and to satisfy the need to feel loved and accepted (Lacan, 2007: 69). This means that when an individual is psychoanalyzed, the researcher, carrying out the analysis, is seeking to understand the need or desire that an individual is seeking to fulfill, and how the id, superego, or ego perceive and respond to that demand.

3. Research Methods

For the purpose of the following study, the researcher textually analyzed Auster's self-myth, and his use of psychoanalytic principles within the text of *The Invention of Silence*, as it relates to Auster's trauma, and parallels trauma studies. This analysis allowed the researcher to consider the way that trauma and the ego work together to create the self-myth, as well as how that self-myth functions, from a psychoanalytic perspective, and as it aligns with Freud and Lacanian theories of self, and psychological need, especially as it relates to the way the individual processes trauma.

4. Results

The constructs of trauma and memory studies were only beginning to take shape, at the time that Auster wrote his novel (Whitehead, 2011: 11). In the case of Auster, this process of discovery, and the way in which he remembers and processes his trauma, is depicted in the creation of his self-myth, and its pedagogical function. More specifically, writing the book *The Invention of Solitude* serves not only as a therapeutic process of meeting need, and putting his trauma into words, but also serves the function of psychoanalyzing his needs and actions, through reflection. As such, it is necessarily tied to the idea of the self, the study of trauma, and the psychoanalytic understanding of whar motivates the individual's actions.

The text of *The Invention of Solitude* is broken into two sub-texts, or essays. The first, "Portrait of an Invisible Man" contains Auster's myth. It is the cataloguing of the journey that Auster takes in order to get to know his father. On this journey, which can be compared to Odysseus's odyssey, he travels to his childhood home, gets rid of his father's belongings, considers the significance of an empty photo album, especially as it compares to a stack of old photos, and seeks to paint a meaningful picture in his own mind of his father, who he considers a "tourist" within his life (Auster, 1989: 7). The moment of learning, consistent with the function of myth, as described by Campbell, comes in the form of an epiphany at the very end of the first half of the book, or at the end of the "Portrait" section. At this point, Auster states that having discovered his family secrets, and the truth about his father's childhood, he understands that his father "never learned to trust anyone" or to "want anything" as

such, his father was not cold to him, on purpose, but rather, focused on what he could control, rather than what he could not. This in turn made him focus on his work, rather than his family, and so prevented him from making deep connections with his family members (Auster, 1989: 51). He uses this epiphany in the second half of the text, the "Book of Memory" in order to connect to the first half of the book by using the myth of the father and son, or Auster's self-myth, as a platform for critically analyzing concepts and feelings related to the development of self, and psychoanalyzing their purpose. This directly ties to trauma and memory studies, in terms of how he is describing and defining his own trauma experience.

Within this discussion found in Part II, Auster directly works to tie the self-myth, which he has constructed in Part I of the text, with psychological theory, and explains how and why certain events occur, and why they are perceived as they are. More specifically, the myth Auster has built, surrounding the trauma of his father's death, is directly tied to his experience as a child. The connection is, according to Auster, directly tied to Freud's argument that each stage of our self, is ultimately co-existing with all other stages of our self. This theory of the inner child, as first presented by Freud suggests that the child inside of us is petulant and prone to narcissism and temper tantrums (Diamond, 2008: 1). In other words, the inner child is interested in protecting itself, and in promoting its own best interest. Thus, memories that are stored by the internal child cannot be relied upon for accuracy because they are tainted by the experience and the emotion of the child that suffered the related trauma.

As such, it could be stated that memory is impacted by, and made less accurate because what is stored in memory continues to function as it did when we were a child, even while we attempt to analyze it as an adult. Auster states that the memories within us are not "intact" by a set structure, but rather, impacted by our personal perception at our most ego-centric state (Auster, 1982). More specifically, in "Mourning and Melancholia" Freud states that he does not understand the "mechanism" of mourning or the "economics of pain," but does know that what is stored is not consistent with what is experienced, and as such man should not "overestimate" the "value of our conclusion" as it relates to our experience of trauma (1917: 252).

However, Auster's use of the world "invention" within the title also insinuates that he does not think that memory represents a full truth, or encompasses all the potential of the "pre-existing" self. Rather, he insinuates that there is not a "unique and autonomous" self to be discovered, but rather the self that is invented, and who is evolving, as the myth is self-written (Dow, 1998: 272). Similarly, Auster found that "even as adults we have buried within us a memory of the way we perceived the world as children" (Auster, 1989: 148). In the case of Auster, it is clear that he perceived his father as cold and indifferent because of his personal dislike for Auster himself, and for his family as a whole. However, when he goes on a journey to "find" his father, he discovers that his narcissistic perception, based on memory and the experience of childhood, was not an accurate depiction of his father, and his motivations. Rather, it was more reflective of Auster's own sense of rejection, because of his father' actions, and because of the trauma of his father's indifference, thus it was not rationally founded in reality.

This is described by Freud, in his work "The Uncanny" by stating that when we experience trauma, or other "uncanny" events that we do not have the ability to fully rationalize or understand that, the experience leads "us back to the old, animistic conception of the universe." (2003: 1). This, animistic concept is ultimately rooted in a child-like belief in magic, and shares many of the functions of myth, as were described by Campbell (1988: 36), as it relates to the function of explaining the unexplainable. More specifically, Freud states that the understanding that is developed is:

> characterized by the idea that the world was peopled with the spirits of human beings; by the subject's narcissistic overvaluation of his own mental processes; by the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts and the technique of magic based on that belief; by the attribution to various outside persons and things of carefully graded magical powers, or 'mama'; as well as by all the other creations with the help of which man, in the unrestricted narcissism of that stage of development, strove to fend off the manifest prohibitions of reality. (2003: 1)

Thus myth, is directly related to the perceptions of childhood, and the psychoanalytic principle that man is driven by emotional impulses and the need to escape what is frightening, and understand what is complex, in simple terms. This is,

Auster states, because we have a need, as adults, to categorize and define our memories, including those that are child-based, in a single and conclusive way. Freud states that when our "infantile" memory is revived when "some impression" or current experience, seems to confirm the assumptions of our childhood, such that we must seek meaning anew (2003: 1). Thus, in the case of Auster, the current loss of his father, revives the feelings of loss and abandonment that are contained within his memories of childhood, and his father's role as a "tourist" in his life, and he is forced to write a new, or to invent and evolve, his self-myth, in order to give meaning to that experience, and to seek resolution of the traumas that are tied to his relationship with his father.

In the "Book of Memory" reflecting on his experience in "The Portrait of an Invisible Man" he speaks genuinely about the role of the storytelling, as it relates to the building of the self-myth. He specifically notes that understanding Freud's theories of memory and trauma do not provide an explanation for his emotions, or his perceptions, but rather, "serves to describe the process, point out the terrain on which it takes place" (Auster, 1989: 148). This use of language, and the word "terrain" is interesting because it feeds into the idea of the analysis, or "Portrait" section of the text as a myth, or storytelling. Just as Odysseus suffered the perils of the sea, as the terrain of his myth, so must Auster, referred to simply as "A" in the "Book of Memory" section of the text, suffer the terrain of his own memory, in trying to find his way "home" (Auster, 1989: 149).

Lacan (1958) similarly spoke of the inner child's desire to sabotage, out of narcissism, as a "passion for ignorance" or a "lack which is filled by self-possessed adult reason" (Parker, 2010: 111). In other words, children, or the inner-child, categorizes memory of traumatic events according to what they take away, or what lack they create in an individual's life, as such, even an adult, when analyzing memories of the past, which have been reasoned and stored as a child, may be ego-centric in nature. For example, Auster states, when referring to his own memory that "A. is more than willing to accept it as true. Unhomeness…" (Auster, 1989: 148). He was tying current experience to the memory and experience of childhood, and how it "appeared to him in the present in the form of these experiences" (Auster, 1989: 148). This is a reflection of how he experienced his father's death, in the current, as

a direct correlation to, or reliving, or the traumatic experiences of his childhood. In essence, his father had chosen to be vacant during his childhood, focusing more on his career than his relationship with Auster, and now, from an emotional perspective, Auster felt that, in death, he was abandoning him for a second time, without ever really getting to know him.

All aspects of this journey of self-discovery are thus meaningfully tied to Auster's self. This is a consistent theme in Auster's works, which was first explored in his writing of his first novel, *The Invention of Solitude* and which is carried throughout many of his works. Rogers defined this theme by stating "the conscious part of the self, spies on the intimate, secret, unconscious self, so as to see through its workings" (2004: 1). In other words, Auster uses his writings as a means of allowing the ego to mediate between the conscious and unconscious, test reality, and form a sense of personal identity, or the creation of the self-myth that fulfills the need for understanding (Edwards, 2014: 24). For Auster, this process occurs through writing. More specifically, he states that "he is remembering his childhood and it is writing itself out for him in the present." (Auster, 1989: 148). The writing is the function of the ego, as it was defined by Freud, in testing reality, and what is written therefore becomes the self-myth.

This occurs, according to Freud as the result of unfulfilled needs, more specifically, as they relate to the desires, and wishes of the child. He specifically states "unsatisfied wishes are the driving power behind phantasies, every separate phantasy contains the fulfillment of a wish, on unsatisfactory reality (1963: 36). Thus, in creating his self-myth Auster seeks to satisfy the need for a relationship with his father, through self-myth, which was unsatisfied in reality, and which cannot be satisfied because of the finality of his father's death. This is consistent with the cathartic resolution of the story, in that his conclusion states that he has a new appreciation of his father, and drew closer to him during the journey of self-discovery that "The Portrait of an Invisible Man" offered to him. More specifically, Auster (1989: 22) wrote that before writing his relationship with his father seemed like "in an unmovable relationship, cut off from each other on opposite sides of a wall." As such, Auster feels that he is able to breathe new life into his father, and gain a relationship with him, by writing about him, and at the end of the essay, suffers his loss and

absence for a third and final time, stating: "When I step into this silence, it will mean that my father has vanished forever" (Auster, 1989: 65). This sense of morning could not have been accomplished if it were not for the journey of discovery that the writing provided and the way that it let him fulfill the fantasy of a satisfying relationship with his father.

Freud specifically wrote of the creation of self-myth, though he did not call it such, as it relates to the production of writers, and the need for fulfillment of these types of wishes, writing that "all [writers] have a hero who is the center of interest." This hero, however, is self-created, because it is "his majesty the Ego, the hero if all day dreams and novels" (Freud, 1963: 40). As such, what Auster was writing was consistent with the trend in writers of self-myth, as defined by Freud, and become ego-centric, and focused on explaining the self.

5. Discussion

The building of a self-myth, is designed to serve the same functions as cultural myth, based within one's personal experiences. In the case of Auster, the stimulus, or experience that leads to self-mythologizing is his father's death, and through the exploration of not only the trauma of his father's death, but also the relationship with his father as a whole, as it is visible from the point of completion, serves as the adventure/experience of the hero within the myth, while Auster himself acts as the hero. This then allows his own exploration of his experience to explain the phenomenon, provide sociological validation, and teach a lesson.

The original trauma, which causes a "break" between Auster, and what he is capable of coping with is not his father's death, but rather, the perception that his father was a visitor in his life, or an "invisible man" within his childhood (Auster, 1989: 2). This absence of his father is then revived, or brought back to memory, by the death of his father, at which time he reexperiences the loss. His need, therefore, is to understand his father, and to build a bond with him, even in his absence. More specifically, he states ""What disturbed me was something else, something unrelated to death or my response to it: the realization my father had left no traces." (Auster, 1989: 4). His father is just as invisible to him, in death, as he was in life, leaving Auster with an overwhelming feeling of need, or of lack, because of a need that was

unfulfilled. So, the creation of his self-myth is, according to Lacan's definition of psychoanalysis, the action taken to fulfill the need for creating understanding of his father, or telling a story, in which he can be the hero, and his need for his father's presence can be fulfilled.

This also allows it to severe as his own healing process, as outlined previously, trauma is stored without words, and so, in order to resolve the trauma, often, the memory must be connected with the words in order to resolve the trauma, and incorporate new knowledge. Auster expresses the wordlessness of memory, stating "It is also true that memory sometimes comes to him as a voice. It is a voice that speaks inside him, and it is not necessarily his own" (Auster, 1989: 122). He specifically addresses the way memory is stored without the words to describe trauma, and his needs to address it with words, stating

> Then he must speak to it in his own voice and tell it to stop, thus returning it to the silence it came from. At other times, it sings to him. At still other times it whispers. And then there are the times it merely hums, or babbles, or cries out in pain. And even when it says nothing, he knows it is still there, and in the silence of this voice that says nothing, he waits for it to speak. (Auster, 1989: 123)

However, he gives his memory voice through writing, and by allowing the story, or in this case, his self-myth, to write itself (Auster, 1989: i). This allows him to incorporate his new knowledge, in this case his family secret, and his new understanding of his father's behavior, into his self-myth. Ultimately, this resolves the trauma by providing him a connection with his father, after death that he could not achieve in life.

6. Conclusion

Auster, in his autobiographical text *The Invention of Solitude,* explores not only one man's trauma, but also the reexperiencing of childhood trauma in the adult self. More specifically, the loss of his father causes him to re-experience the absence of his father and the rejection of his childhood, while also coping with the more permanent loss of the father figure. According to trauma theory, this creates a break between Auster's reality, and his ability to cope, which alters the way memories are stored and

processed. Psychoanalytically, this leaves a need for Auster to come to a full understanding of his experience, and to contextualize it, and give it meaning.

This is ultimately accomplished through the creation of a self-myth. In this case, the first half of the text, "The Portrait of an Invisible Man" is used to generate the myth that gives Auster meaning related to his trauma, and to incorporate new knowledge, into meaning, while also allowing his personal story to serve a pedagogical function. This allows him to give words to the memories that mumble and babble, and instead give them shape. This is followed, then, by his own psychoanalytical exploration of his myth, and his need for the myth, as a way of finding peace. Ultimately, as described by Lacan, the ego is the negotiator between the need, in this case related to an understanding of his father, and the rational. The journey that he goes on, through his self-myth, allows him to replace his father, as a "tourist" with a man of stature, who, though he suffers flaws, is tractable within Auster's life, and writing. He sees himself, ultimately, as a Pinocchio style hero, saving both himself, and his father, from invisibility.

Ultimately, it can be asserted, that while everyone experiences hard times, what constitutes trauma, and how a person responds to that trauma is unique, and based on both their resources and their primal need. This directly impacts their memories, or the way they process experience. This is specifically visible in Paul Auster's memoir *The Invention of Solitude,* which serves as a framework for understanding the connection between trauma, memory, and language as a framework for expressing the psychological need to resolve trauma, and create meaning. *The Invention of Solitude,* as an autobiographical text, and a complete self-myth, performs all of the functions of a myth, within Auster's own recollection, and resolution, allowing him to make meaning from, and redefine his own experiences, and to meet his psychological need for connection with his father. This parallels the needs, and responses to trauma as defined by Freud and Lacan, and provides insight into the role of personal myths in healing from trauma.

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