

## **Beyond Paul Auster's Postmodernity: Dialogical Dimensions of the Self in Auster's *Oracle Night* (2003)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present research looks into Paul Auster's intriguing novel *Oracle Night* and initiates a metaphorical journey deep inside the architectural world of the postmodern self of his protagonist, Sidney Orr. Employing the "Virtual Fictional/ Factual Positioning" (VFP) theoretical framework, this article relates the experience of uncertainty as a central mode in the postmodern self and aims to establish whether Orr develops a dialogical self which, according to Hubert Hermans' Dialogical Self Theory (DST), functions as a more developed self in the present era of globalization and cross-cultural movements. The findings indicate that Orr's dialogical attempt is having positive affects which, in the end, are beneficial for the psychological health of his whole self-system.

*Keywords:* Bakhtin, dialogical self, fictional positioning, literary theory, Paul Auster, postmodern self

### **INTRODUCTION**

A careful examination of Auster's fictional characters indicates that his protagonists take part in a process to reinvent a true image of their own selves. What happens is that they give voice to their heroes/heroines in the fictional world, and by blending art and life they try to come to terms with

their own selves. As Auster's protagonists share their author's experiences, his readers attempt to ascertain where fact ends and fiction begins, and some of them have been unable to distinguish between factual and fictional Austers.

The present study goes beyond the actual experiences of Auster as an author and instead relates the experience of his protagonist to his own invented hero in the story within a story. The experience of uncertainty is at the centre of the discussion in relation to the author figure in the present examination of Auster's *Oracle Night* (2003).

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This article scrutinises the interrelationships between the protagonist, Sidney Orr, and his hero's, Nick Bowen's, self-system in the main narrative and the story within a story where the hero is created and developed. Based on the "Virtual Fictional/ Factual Positioning" (VFP) framework, primarily, I identify the various I-positions in the author and hero's self-system and present the overall formation of a dialogical space among these positions, both fictional and factual. The inclusive relationship between the author and his hero is discussed.

The intricate system of valuations in the narratives of the author and the dialogical counter-relationship with his hero-counterpart are deciphered. The possibility of development of new positions in the protagonist/ author's self is laid out in the final resolution. Mainly, the present literary analysis establishes whether Orr develops a dialogical self which is much more effective compared to his generally perceived postmodern self.

Thereby, I intend to move beyond postmodernist elements and the postmodern self, mostly discussed in relation to Auster's novels and characters, and present a new dialogical dimension to the study of his novels. A new model of the self, which is dialogical according to Hubert Hermans' (1999) contribution to a psychological study of the self, is introduced in this literary analysis.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### **Uncertainty: Central Experience of The Postmodern Self**

Postmodern knowledge has an unpredictable and inexplicable impact upon human consciousness and yet does not follow a unified hierarchy: "Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (Lyotard, 1979). Reflecting the collective mind set in postmodernism, all universal certainties are replaced by continuous doubt and anxiety.

Ihab Hassan (1987), among others, adhered to the idea that the postmodern self was anchored in uncertainty, chaos and a sense of dislocation. As a result of such belief, authority in any form denies the intrusion of the unpredictable in the postmodern self. Postmodernism, in this kind of interpretation, is opposed to the structures imposed by the controlling elite; instead, it paves the way for the inclusion of discerning, decentred and multiple voices. Consequently, traditional conservative notions are rejected in favour of diversity and radicalism: "The Counter Cultures, political and otherwise ... Rebellion and Reaction!" (p. 43).

Theories of the self describe it as being extended in time and space. On the historical development of the self, three models have been defined: traditional, modern and postmodern. Within such a spirit, the postmodern self characterizes a lack of certainty and suffers from a collective crisis of belief. Hubert Hermans (1999) proposed

a dialogical model of the self as a model that better fitted the present era of globalization and cross-cultural movements.<sup>1</sup>

According to Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010), the postmodern self is characterized by its strong scepticism and emphasizes the importance of variety, multiplicity and fragmentation. The postmodern self is involved in various and multiple relationships, as a result of which this model seeks to adopt a variety of roles. In the context of this miscellaneous communicational milieu, the self finds itself strongly decentralized, and at times it seems to lose its inner coherence and stability. Populated by a plurality of voices, the postmodern self often cannot speak with one single voice that is recognized as the "proper" one (p. 92).

In order to adapt to the changes and flux of the postmodern era, the postmodern self is also in a state of constant change. In this context, the self sometimes experiences incoherent internal patterns. In fact, in postmodern times, one cannot distinguish a "real me" that is identifiable throughout time. Identity is "created by outside forces ... Life is like a story or text that is being written and rewritten constantly" (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 93)

Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) proposed that the processes of globalization and localization were reflected in the "mini-

society" of the self in terms of global and local "I-positions" (or simply "positions") that could lead to "identity confusion" and experiences of uncertainty. Central to the present postmodern era, on the one hand, this experience can contribute to Dialogical Self Theory (DST) by opening up a broad range of unexpected possibilities in the self; but on the other hand, this can also be a disadvantage, because at high levels of intensity it can also lead to anxiety and insecurity. DST assumes that:

...the experience of uncertainty reflects a global situation of multi-voicedness (complexity) that does not allow a fixation of meaning (ambiguity), that has no super-ordinate voice for resolving contradictions and conflicting information (deficit knowledge), and that is to a large extent unpredictable. (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 28).

Uncertainty in this sense not only describes the self as being in a positive or negative state, but also illuminates an experiential quality of the self in action.

The dialogical self, according to Hermans (1999; 2001a), assumes no central or pre-dominant core but considers the self to be a composite of various narrative voices. In this scheme, partly inspired by Bakhtin's (1981) theory of dialogism, a variety of voices narrate their own life story and try to establish their own ideology in a continuous dialogue.

<sup>1</sup> For more information regarding the three models of the self in collective history – traditional, modern and postmodern – refer to *Dialogical self theory: Positioning and counter-positioning in a globalizing society* by Hermans & Hermans-Konopka (2010).

Within such a framework and considering new literary developments of the dialogical aspect of the self in “Virtual Fictional and Factual Positioning” (VFP) (Barani & Wan Yahya, 2017; Barani et al., 2014), this article presents an original reading of Auster’s novels. As intra-textual qualitative research, VFP evaluates the dialogical mutual workings of the author’s positioning with regard to his/her hero/heroine counterpart (Barani et al., 2014). VFP is much indebted to Bakhtin’s (1990) ideology, in his significant essay, “Author and hero in aesthetic activity.”

I identify and elaborate on the workings of the various I-positions in the author and hero’s self-system and show how the dialogical space is mainly created in the inclusive relationship between the author and his hero in the chosen text. Valuations, as units of meaning and their affective connotations, are derived from the narratives of the author and his hero. According to VFP, the author places him/herself within his/her fictional relations (fictional positioning) and creates a bond with his/her hero/heroine; afterwards, he/she places him/herself in his/her actual life (factual positioning) and extends fresh valuations.<sup>2</sup>

### **Paul Auster’s Postmodernity**

In the Austerian world, the reader is confronted with a non-linear series of unusual events and a life narrative that is in constant evolution and growth. Auster

<sup>2</sup> For comprehensive information about the “Virtual Fictional and Factual Positioning” (VFP) theoretical framework refer to Barani et al., (2014).

presents the reality of the postmodern self, in a time of uncertainty, in an endless endeavour to explore his own ambiguities. His narrative is replete with stories within stories, no one is what he/she seems, and everything is unstable and in constant flux (Varvogli, 2001).

Mark Brown (2007) focused on Auster’s character’s relationship with “postmodern societies” and reveals some remarkable “correlations between location, language and identity”. Peacock (2010) similarly called attention to Auster’s concern with the individual’s problematic relationship with language. Peacock believed that Auster’s view on language was essentially ethical and communal. In order to use language creatively, one needs to be absorbed in the plurality of experience and to listen to the voices of others.

Of particular significance for my dialogical analysis of the postmodern self is an examination of Auster’s theme of identity quest, which is also a recurrent pattern in postmodern fiction. In Auster’s novels, the idea of an autonomous subject gives way to an understanding of subject and identity characterized by instability and complexity. Berge (2005), specifically, mentioned that Auster’s main characters underwent identity problems in the postmodern age, and on different levels they struggled to find meaning in their confrontations with the world. In their quest for their lost selves, the narratives of the characters played a crucial role. In postmodern literature, characters’ self-perceptions rely heavily on their concepts of narratives. The fragmented and often unfinished stories within stories

narrated by the protagonists shape the characters' personas in the mind of the reader.

Auster's characters, in their struggles with conflicting identities, open up the possibility of multiple worlds through their narratives (Rankenburg, 2005). The identity issue makes Paul Auster's characters a "subject", whereby their first concern is to find their place in an unpredictable world (Docherty, 1993). "The question of who is who and whether or not we are who we think we are" (Auster, 1993, p. 264) is what interests Auster the most. Docherty (1993) affirmed that, in this manner, the "subject" was concerned with establishing his own "rational processes", yet the author provided him/her with no prior knowledge. The "solitude of the postmodern self", who is denied the "solace of an identity" (Docherty, 1993) in an uncertain world, is the particular case of Auster's characters.

Within such a fruitful framework, I intend to demonstrate how the Austerian protagonist/ author in *Oracle Night* attempts to reinvent his own self through storytelling. I aim to express the ways in which he builds a world inside his own mind, populating it with numerous characters and then participating in this society of people. This artistic world is the representational world of fiction, as opposed to the real world of the protagonist/ author himself. Sidney Orr's quest for a lost sense of his self is shown in his effort to establish a dialogical healthy endeavour to discover a significant part – I-position – in his self-repertoire that can offer psychological well-being.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### VFP in the Dialogical Relation of the Author and Hero's Self-Realm

Sidney Orr, who has partially recovered from a fatal illness, contemplates a fictional character, Nick Bowen. In a near-death experience, and realizing that the universe is governed merely by chance, Bowen sees his survival in a brand-new birth, and hence decides to leave his wife and takes the first flight to Kansas City where, in an unfortunate incident, he locks himself in an underground room. Here, Orr's muse in the ongoing Bowen's story is silenced.

Orr's mind is preoccupied due to his wife's, Grace's, recent suspicious behaviour. He attributes this to her love life, before their marriage with an old friend, and now a mentor, John Trause. Orr wonders whether the romance has been rekindled during his stay in the hospital and, worse, if it may even have resulted in her becoming pregnant. Under these circumstances, and in his quest for truth, he starts writing about what he calls the "soap opera" of Grace's affair with John.

Only a few days after Orr's discharge from hospital, one morning, which is repeatedly and significantly referred to by him as "the morning of the day in question" (p. 2, 8, 44, 155, 185, 189),<sup>3</sup> he buys a blue Portuguese notebook from an exotic stationery store called "Paper Palace". His venture into the enchanting world of the "Paper Palace" proves to be the beginning

<sup>3</sup> Subsequent references are to the 2011 edition of *Oracle Night* and will be cited parenthetically by page numbers in the text.

of a series of significant events in his life, a journey into the realm of storytelling and fictional relations;

...the stillness was so pronounced that I could hear the scratching of the man’s pencil behind me. Whenever I think about that morning now, the sound of that pencil is always the first thing that comes back to me. To the degree that the story I am about to tell makes any sense, I believe this was where it began – in the space of those few seconds, when the sound of that pencil was the only sound left in the world. (p. 4).

He feels like an “unfortunate traveller” coming back from a long journey to his

“rightful place” in the world, at his desk (p. 9); he mysteriously finds an urge to write. The “Paper Palace” functions as a grand motivator. “I-as-happy” and “I-as-joyful” are relevant positions that accompany Orr’s storyteller position. Using the Personal Position Repertoire (PPR) method (Hermans, 2001b), Table 1 lists a complete record of Orr’s internal and external positions in relation to his fictional and factual realms. Relevant explanations with regard to each specific position are provided in the following parts of the analysis.

Near the end of the novel, we are briefly told about Orr’s catastrophic fall down a flight of stairs in a subway station that caused his fatal injury, so we are in

Table 1  
List of Orr’s internal and external positions (adapted from Hermans, 2001b)

Internal positions		External positions	
Factual positioning	Fictional positioning	Factual positioning	Fictional positioning
I as husband	I as storyteller	The morning in question	Nick Bowen
I as history teacher	I as artist/novelist	Oracle night	Eva
I as editor	I as independent	Paper Palace	Ed Victory
I as friend	I as joyful	The blue notebook	Sylvia Maxwell
I as ignorantly happy	I as healthy	My story	Rosa Leightman
I as timid		The desk	
I as fool		The room	
I as loyal		Mr. Chang	
I as devoted		Grace	
I as obedient		John Trause	
I as caring		Jacob	
I as uncertain		Baby stories	
I as shameful		Art	
I as fearful		Warsaw phone directory	
I as weak		African princess	
I as dreaming			
I as lost			
I as pessimist			
I as freedom-seeker			
I as accepting			
I as enlightened happy			

no doubt that his survival is far beyond reasonable expectations. In telling the story about Bowen, Orr is most likely connecting to and contemplating his own dreadful experience and the sequence of events that could have preceded the accident. What if he walks away from his life and start his life anew? Instead, Orr decides to see himself as Bowen, his hero, and to observe his possible response to the same circumstances. Orr adds, "we have all imagined letting go of our lives ... at one moment or another we have all wanted to be someone else" (p. 12). He even fools himself by expressing his impartial involvement in Bowen's situation.

During the long journey over these nine days and his contemplation of and confrontations with his hero and his significant others, Orr has to decide "how" he is going to start again. Is he too going to leave everything behind, like Bowen? Or, in spite of the issues in his marriage and his doubts about Grace, is he willing to work through it all? In his challenge to "fleshing out the story" of Bowen, he has to confront himself.

Orr makes Bowen the opposite of himself in every bodily quality, on purpose, "I expressly made him someone I was not, an inversion of myself" (p. 15). Bowen's marriage to Eva has failed, especially after visiting Rosa Leighman. Bowen is determined; he wants a "change" and he creates this "change". He has the courage to put himself in an unknown and even unpromising future. Seeking freedom from his previous self and life sets Bowen moving in the opposite direction to his creator,

who pursues one straight direction in sheer devotion to everything he has, including "Grace", his wife. Bowen fails in his "I-as-husband" position in favour of a "freedom seeker", with no feelings of guilt or remorse.

Table 2 lists the internal and external positions in Bowen's self-repertoire. The encounters between various opposing positions in Bowen and Orr's self-space facilitate the process of meaning formation in the dialogical confrontations of "opposites". In a counter value, of Orr as the "timid", we have Bowen the "daring". Likewise, "I-as-indifferent", "I as disloyal" and "I-as-disobedient" in Bowen's repertoire bear opposite values from Orr's "I-as-caring" "I-as-loyal" and "I-as-obedient", respectively.

Table 2  
List of Bowen's internal and external positions  
(adapted from Hermans, 2001b)

Internal positions	External positions
I as husband	My wife/Eva
I as editor	Ed Victory
I as freedom-seeker	Warsaw phone directory
I as lightning man	Rosa Leighman
I as daring	Sylvia Maxwell
I as indifferent	My room
I as disloyal	
I as disobedient	
I as hopeful	

VFP in the dialogical relation between the author and hero's self-realm is depicted in Figure 1. Bowen's self-system develops inside his author's, as a "man in man" (Bakhtin, 1990) and as one of his self-positions. The outer circle and the larger one in the middle show the external and internal self-space of the author, respectively. The

internal dotted circles, in the same way, demonstrate the hero's self-space. In fact, the two self-domains are inclusive and permeable. The shadows behind Bowen's self-system reveal the "field of vision" and the extent to which this self-space strives for dependency and autonomy – as it also moving to the edges, to the right. Positions located at the top of these two interconnected systems are associated with fictional positioning and are highlighted in bold.

"I-as-freedom-seeker", which is a mutual position between the author and his created hero, functions as a "meta-position" that generates a dynamic dialogical relation between various other positions, particularly in Orr's (p. 2, 130, 207) and his hero's (p. 22, 51, 56, 58, 89) self-repertoire. A meta-position functions as a directing figure in the self-repertoire, boosting the correlation and workings of a range of I-positions (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010).

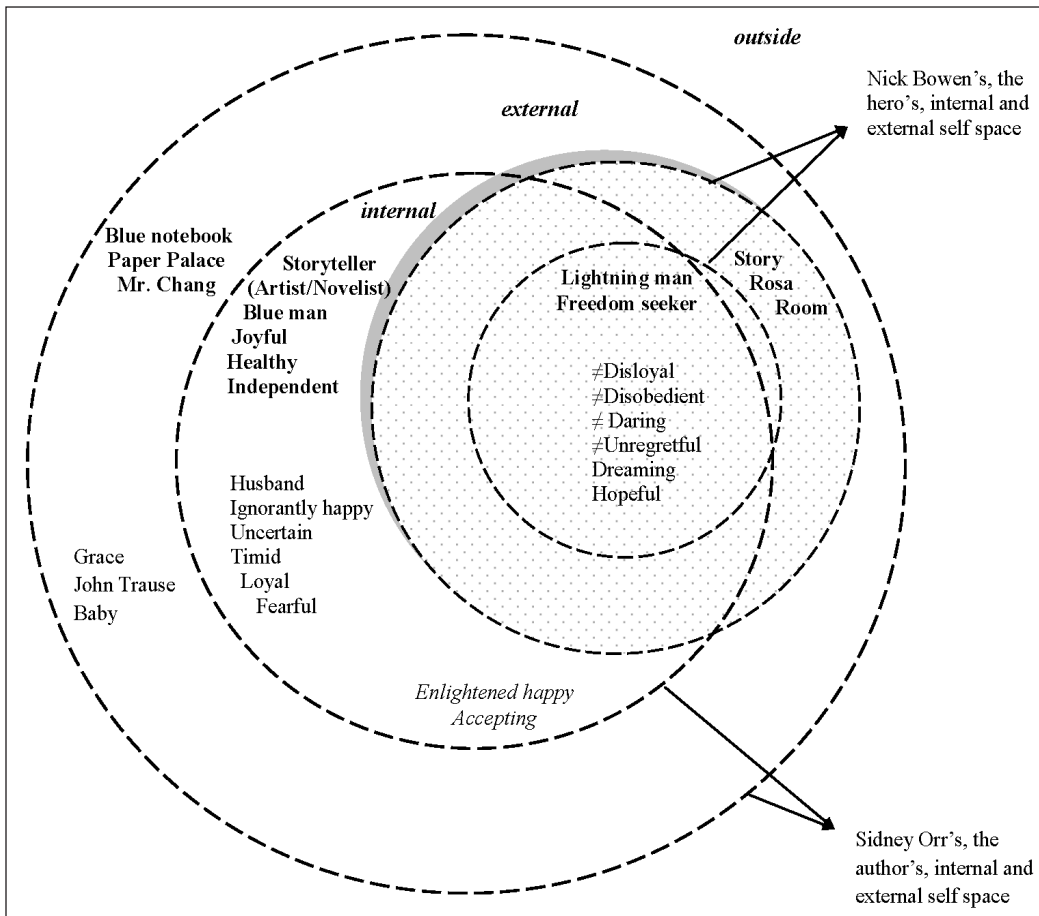


Figure 1. Interrelation of the main positions in Orr (outer circles) and his hero's self-repertoire (inside dotted circles). In Bowen's internal self-space, ≠ indicates the counter-positions to Orr. (Adapted from Hubert Hermans' (2001a) Model of Positions in a Multivoiced Self)



In addition, the “storyteller”, or “artist/novelist” position as a “promoter position” steering the workings of positive positions, acts like an “innovative” and “integrative force” (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), helping to maintain order and stability in the author/ protagonist’s self. The figure, furthermore, shows two newly developed positions of “I-as-enlightened happy” and “I-as-accepting” – a complementary explanation is provided in subsequent sections.

Orr confirms that the fate of Bowen’s wife, Eva, is as important to him as that of his hero, Bowen. Orr creates a contrast between the calmness and indifference of Bowen and the despair and passion of Eva (p. 52). After Bowen’s disappearance, Eva searches for him and believes him to be a “miserable, half-mad soul wandering around a strange city without a penny in his pocket” (p. 72). The fictional couple stand in opposition to the author’s actual life position with his wife. Grace is an introspect, who resembles Bowen, in that she too can start a new life at any time; Grace abandoned her marriage for one night (p. 149) – that is, in another sense, an “oracle night” for her – and tries to come to terms with herself and her marriage. Yet, unlike Bowen, she returns.

Orr’s most significant other, Grace, is for him an “enchanted being”, an “implacable love” (p. 51) and a “model of kindness and patience” (p. 185). He describes his love for Grace very delicately, in terms of “eternal flames of being” and “fires of quidity” (p. 17). Bowen’s love for Rosa is a fictional

embodiment of the same desire in Orr for Grace.

In spite of all the love and devotion, Orr is in doubt about everything in relation to Grace, and in all his internal dialogues he conveys this worry. Orr knows nothing about Grace’s past, but “just keeps on loving her, blindly” (p. 161). Many of Orr’s internal factual positions, such as “I-as-devoted”, “I-as-obedient”, “I as loyal” and “I as timid”, are in close coalition with Grace. This shows the degree of prominence and her influence as a significant other – the loved one – in Orr’s self-repertoire.

As Orr faces difficulties in establishing reasonable communication with his loved one, Grace, Bowen is also unable to make any contact with Rosa; Bowen calls Rosa repeatedly but she fails to reply (p. 58, 74). Both the hero and his author are in desperate need to make contact with and be in union with their significant others. In the next section, I examine the valuations and meaning units of the protagonist/ author in his confrontation with his hero and himself. I evaluate the probability of Orr’s rightful positioning towards himself and Grace.

### **Self-Investigation: Matrix of Valuations and Affects**

In addressing valuations in relation to the “temporal dimensions” of the main positions under discussion, I utilize open questions based on Hermans’ (2001b) model. Three general questions address the main events and influence of significant people in the protagonist/ author’s self-narrative of the past, present and future.

The answers to these questions lead me to construct some statements to indicate meaning units that have great value in Orr's life. Moreover, Orr's narratives reveal two internal factual I-positions manifested in his actual life narratives, "I-as-husband", which is evaluated in close contact with his loved one, Grace, and "I-as-storyteller", which is dramatized in his fictional conversation with Bowen and is intently interrelated to his venture in the "Paper Palace" and the world of the "blue notebook".

In the previous discussion on Grace as a significant other in Orr's self-space, I referred to Orr's love and affection towards his wife; what now needs to be further clarified is how Orr manages his position as a "husband". In nearly all the encounters between "husband" and "wife" positions, the significant role of John Trause is seen. He is a trusted old friend who is now accepted as a family member, a "favorite uncle" or a "godfather-without-portfolio" (p. 24). As a close friend of Orr, he is also a mentor in his writing career. There is, however, another story behind the casual uncle figure that makes John significant as an external position in Orr's self-system.

Early in the novel, Orr mentions that John has kindly "sacrificed much of his time and energy to helping Grace" in a time of "crisis" when Orr was in hospital (p. 24). Ironically, Orr as "ignorantly happy" is not aware that they had an affair while he was in hospital.

Auster's protagonist wears the mask of an ex-cuckolded "fool husband" (p. 25, 67, 185, 194), and he narrates the real

story of his own life; he stands aside and watches what is happening between Grace and John. Taking this intentional internal position helps him to distinguish his own position in his married life that gives way to the workings of "I-as-ignorantly happy" as a central position that bears dysfunctional valuations.

Assessing Orr's functional and dysfunctional valuations (Hermans, 1999) reveals that he feels considerable powerlessness in his prolonged longing for Grace's love. In addition, his strict devotion and "contact and union" with his loved one demonstrate his over-dependency. Believing himself to be a "half-destroyed cripple" (p. 144-145), Orr's postmodern self at this stage displays a devastating low level of self-confidence.

Closely related to the writing and storyteller parts are the external positions of "Paper Palace", "the blue notebook" and Mr. Chang. Paper Palace, a significant promoter place, appears to be a pretentious name with qualities of both grandeur and fragility. By stepping inside the stationery store, Orr crosses the line between reality and fiction. Walking into the "Paper Palace", followed by the sight of the blue Portuguese notebook, completes the whole scenario of the author on the threshold of fictional relations.

The blue notebook as a significant other in Orr's factual external realm bonds with two other internal fictional positions: "I-as-joyful" and "I-as-healthy", "I held the notebook in my hands for the first time, I felt something akin to physical pleasure, a rush

of sudden, incomprehensible well-being" (p. 4-5). Orr, the "storyteller", appreciates the valuable effect of "writing", comparable to that of medicine, doubtless necessary for his recovery after the incident (p. 90).

After two days of writing steadily in the notebook about the account of Nick Bowen, Orr is astonished to see that the voice of the "storyteller" is silenced inside him. He is wondering whether he is using the notebook or the notebook is using him (p. 141). "I-as-lost" is mostly affiliated with the blue notebook and Bowen's story. This position is active in a sense of mental, and even at times physical, disappearance in the act of writing.

Mr. Chang, the Chinese owner of "Paper Palace", does him an unintentional favour and stimulates Orr's confrontation with his daring more functional/ dialogical self. The name "Chang" puns on the idea of "change" and possible transformation. Orr's three visits to Chang equate to three calls on "magician dude", who grants him an opportunity to experience the impossible.

After their first encounter in the "Paper Palace", the next time Orr accompanies Mr. Chang to Chinatown, and to a hidden sex club. The enterprise in the club is an escape from loyalty and obedience in Orr's marriage. Orr steps outside of his self-space, his secure zone, and lets himself go; he experiences the freedom his hero also experiences (p. 125). He needs to get away from his "Grace" for a while and observe from a distance what is happening in his marriage. He gives way to "male weakness" (p. 130) in a little sexual fondling; then,

broken by this exhibition of sheer weakness, he leaves the place without bothering to look for Chang or saying goodbye.

In their third visit at the new location of "Paper Palace", Orr notices "a tiny doll-sized statue of a man" with a typewriter in the window of the shop:

...you could read the words that had been typed on the page: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us... (p. 173)

The note speaks of all the contradictions that preoccupy the postmodern mind of the protagonist/ author. Though Orr's crusade in the "Paper Palace" provokes him in many ways, he is belittled like a doll in Chang's hands.

### **Transcendence of the Postmodern Self to Dialogical Self**

The colour blue and its emotional and moral connotations in the life of the author/ protagonist are exemplary. Orr notes that the colour blue stands for feelings of "sadness", "loyalty" and, at the same time, "hope" (p. 42-43). These moral qualities definitely portray Orr's postmodern personality traits. Orr describes Grace's amazing blue eyes with passion, and we know that the "blue"

notebook was a source of inspiration for him. Orr, the “blue man”, is uncertain, as what his name, Or(r), indicating alternatives and ambiguity, also conveys. He is continually doubtful and thinking of alternatives, about both his factual life with Grace and his fictional relations, how to finish Bowen’s story. Orr is a man of “or”, with various options/ choices.

On the other hand, Bowen is called the “New York lightning man” (p. 62), because he was stricken by lightning on his “oracle night” and yet has mysteriously survived. The “lightning man” has two connotations, one literal, being definitive and certain, and the other figurative, an enlightened man with new knowledge and a legacy/ prophecy for the future. Bowen demonstrates his own perspective, though it might be contrary to the one held by his creator. The whole subjectivity of Bowen stands as a unique and independent identity, and his growth and development can be beneficial to the maturation of his creator/ author’s self. In this light, I identify the “core act of coalition” between the author and his hero in the oppositions of “I-as-blue man” and “I-as-lightning man”.

Table 3 demonstrates the author’s valuations through the eyes of the “blue man” on the left side, and his hero counter-position’s valuations from the perspective of the “lightning man” on the right. Meanwhile, narrating Bowen’s story, Orr constantly relates things to his actual life-positioning. The “blue man” cannot detach himself totally from his factual positioning into

his fictional one. This could explain why a number of valuations from the perspective of “I-as-blue man” that are related to Orr’s factual positioning with Grace are shared by his overall and central position of “I-as-ignorantly happy”, which will be examined in detail in later parts of the discussion. “I-as-lost” and “I-as-doubtful”, or uncertain, are close internal factual positions that are in an active relationship with “I-as-blue man”.

In an active dialogical coalition, the “I-as blue man” interacts with the “I” of the hero, the “lightning man”. This dialogue is continually problematized throughout the novel. By assuming the discourse of another, the author looks upon himself through the eyes of his hero.

Table 4 describes the affective indices that indicate the psychological stance of these two positions with regard to S-motive, self-enhancement, O-motive, contact and union with others, and the positive (P) and negative (N) feelings associated with them. The meaning units from the perspective of the blue man demonstrate that the feelings of S-motive prevail over the O-motive, which ultimately displays a general affect with high positive feelings and low negative feelings. On the contrary, the “lightning man” seeks interaction with his loved one, Rosa; and when he finds himself locked in the room, he does not lose hope, which reveals high levels of O-motive. He is not regretful about his course of actions, which represents high levels of S-motive. Generally, Bowen demonstrates a high level of positive feelings.

Table 3  
*VFP in the dialogical confrontation between the "Blue Man" and the "Lightning Man" (Adapted from Hermans, 2002b)*

Valuations from the Perspective of the "Blue Man"	Valuations from the Perspective of the "Lightning Man"
<p>Past (memories of the past)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I experienced a near fatal accident, and since a year ago I haven't been able to write anything.</li> </ol>	<p>Past (memories of the past)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I was the editor of a famous publishing house in New York. I grew bored with my job.</li> <li>2. I have been married to my wife, Eva, for five years. My marriage has come to a "standstill".</li> </ol>
<p>Present (experiences in the present)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am frantically in love with my wife.</li> <li>2. A blue notebook became the source of my inspiration. I am sometimes lost in the notebook, writing the story of a man called Nick Bowen.</li> <li>3. I witness how he stepped out of his life after a near-fatal accident, which is contrary to what I would do under any circumstances.</li> <li>4. After a few pages of writing steadily, I have lost my muse after putting my hero in a hole-like room underground.</li> <li>5. I feel responsible for my hero and want to continue writing and to rescue him. Yet, my thoughts are busy with my own problems in my life. Though I think Grace has betrayed me, with our close family friend, John Trause, I feel I am still loyal to her.</li> <li>6. I have a certain kind of sadness and a personal problem that I cannot resolve.</li> </ol>	<p>Present (experiences in the present)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I have madly fallen in love with Rosa Leighman, who delivered the manuscript of a long-lost novel called <i>Oracle Night</i>.</li> <li>2. I have experienced a near-death accident. Lightning struck me and could easily have taken my life.</li> <li>3. I found the courage to step out of my life and begin a new one. I flew to Kansas City.</li> <li>4. I am seeking freedom.</li> <li>5. I am courageous and determined to face any kinds of problems and obstacles along the way. I have no intention of returning.</li> <li>6. I met an old taxi-driver who is fascinated by collecting old phonebooks in a warehouse underground. I intend to work for him. He is in hospital and I am locked in a room with the lights turned off.</li> </ol>
<p>Future (desires and anxieties for future)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am trying to provide at least some light for my hero in that dark room that can symbolize hope, or maybe send Rosa down with him so he can be with his loved one.</li> <li>2. I am caught between various possibilities in my actual life and I can't figure out my relationship with my wife, Grace. I am seeking freedom.</li> </ol>	<p>Future (desires and anxieties for future)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am thinking, dreaming and planning for the future. I am trying to forget the past.</li> <li>2. I think of what happened as God's test and I am hopeful that someone will come and rescue me. I am seeking freedom.</li> </ol>

Table 4  
*Affective connotations in the “Blue Man” and the “Lightning Man” (Adapted from Hermans, 2001b)*

	S	O	P	N
Blue Man	High	Low	High	Low
Lightning Man	High	High	High	Low

Note. S: affect describes the level of self-enhancement; O: affect describes the level of craving contact with the other; P: describes the level of positive feelings; N affect describes the level of negative feelings. The general feelings of each position in relation to the affective indices are indicated by an ordinal scale of low/ medium/ high.

Orr learns, from his hero, to act spontaneously, live a free life and face the reality of the boredom in his marriage, either break up or fix it in a logical/ dialogical manner. To come to terms with himself and his marriage is Orr’s main challenge and story theme. Orr, the author, grants the freedom and courage he lacks to his hero; he stands aside and observes what is happening to him; accordingly, the author experiences the freedom to be other. The horizontal and vertical movements of the author within his own self space enable him to enter into a continuous dialogical relationship with his own self and the external world, and thus develop an effective dialogical self.

In this dialogical world view, the author pictures the world through the eyes of his hero, and he creates a “field of vision” that is the arena for a competition between various viewpoints. After a while, the “blue man” becomes so preoccupied with his factual positioning that he abandons any efforts to rescue his hero (p. 179). Orr has to reconcile his own uncertainties and overcome his own difficulty in writing his own factual life story; then, after that, he might turn back to rescue Bowen from his fallout shelter.

In order to decipher the ambiguities of his postmodern self, Orr locks himself into his own self-domain and initiates an internal dialogue that leads to a true story. Art and life in this sense become one in Orr’s dialogical relations between various parts of his internal and external fictional/ factual positions and the unique reply and reaction he ultimately gives to the circumstances in his life. Orr relates his own self to his hero’s and experiences the world and the story of his hero. Though each of them occupies a unique position in the context of the postmodern situation, that may at times contrast, the virtual dialogical relationship between the fictional realm and the factual one helps to develop new promising positions in the meantime.

Orr analyses himself frankly and gives a description of his own reaction to major circumstances in his life. “Like somebody trapped inside a cloud” (p. 189) he needs a lightning strike to start over again. Exactly like his hero he is searching for freedom. “I was the lost man”, confesses Orr the “blue man”. Twenty years later, he evaluates and discloses his own self in the past, especially those significant nine days in a revealing passage:

*I was a lost man, an ill man, a man struggling to regain his footing, but underneath all the missteps and follies I committed that week, I knew something I wasn't aware of knowing. At certain moments during those days, I felt as if my body had become transparent, a porous membrane through which all the invisible forces of the world could pass – a nexus of airborne electrical charges transmitted by the thoughts and feelings of others.* (p. 189-190, italics added)

He has experienced lightning, as he says it was “a nexus of airborne electrical charges” that was transmitted through him by the dialogical interaction with others – Grace, John, Bowen etc.

In order to come to terms with his own self, Orr looks at Grace's old photo album and thereafter initiates a journey into the past to “Grace before [he] met her”, a “visual history” of Grace's life until the age of twenty-seven, and before Orr had met her. He seeks new communicational possibilities with Grace in a story that depicts her as the heroine. He writes this imaginary story with a truth-shade, backwards, in the blue notebook.

After his fictional venture into his fictional positioning, he now puts himself into a real, but at the same time imaginary, story that no facts can support. Grace and John, in spite of a great difference in age, let their romantic relationship grow before Orr comes onto the scene. Grace decides to

marry Orr, which is also recommended to her by John. Yet the story does not finish here; after Orr's accident, when there is no hope of survival, Grace pays a visit to John, who is now just a family friend. She bursts out crying; and then, the climax of the story, according to Orr, is when:

Their bodies remember the past ... they can't stop themselves. The past conquers the present, and for the time being the future no longer exists. Grace lets herself go, and Trause doesn't have the strength not to go with her. (p. 184)

And then the pregnancy happens; Grace is not sure who the father of the baby is. Orr finds truth in the courageous act of Grace, who decides ultimately that the baby is Orr's and stays married to him.

The moment Orr steps into the fictional wonderland of his story and follows his muse, he finds the courage to see himself in a new light, just like his own hero, the “lightning man”. He reads his actual life story in a more realistic light. While narrating this imaginal story, we can observe that a new courageous Orr is born. He rightfully comes to terms with and accepts Grace for whom she really is. Consequently, he develops an “accepting” position and pushes the “blue man” into the background of his self-system to give space to the conditions for healthier positions.

Noticeably, the idea of time is very central in Orr's fictional and factual story. Admittedly, Orr looks to the past and finds

“the future” inside him, and with this enlightenment he cherishes the present moment.

Orr goes beyond his fictional positioning as an author and looks at his own actual life. He tries to mend the current circumstances in his life in the confrontation of his central positions, “I-as-ignorantly happy” with the one that he develops through this process, “I-as-enlightened happy”. The valuations developed through the eyes of these two internal factual positions are sketched out in Table 5. Meaning units from the perspective of “I-as-ignorantly-happy” are listed in the left side of the table and are mostly associated with negative feelings. In addition, meaning units from the perspective of the newly developed position of “I-as-enlightened happy” are displayed on the right side of the table and are apparently associated with positive perceptions.

The process of dialogical meaning formation provides a departure of the self from postmodern qualities to dialogical ones. This development boosts Orr’s psychological and mental well-being. As the “ignorantly happy” narrates its own story, despite all of his internal conflicts, Orr (re)constructs new meaning units. “I-as-enlightened happy” is developed due to the live interaction of internal positions that implies brightness in both the physical sense and the spiritual one.

The affective indices of S-motive and O-motive, and the positive (P) and negative (N) feelings associated with them, are

presented in Table 6. The meaning units from the perspective of “ignorantly happy” express the feelings of O-motive prevail over S-motive, and as a result a general affect with high negative feelings and low positive feelings is displayed. In contrast, “enlightened happy” seeks contact with others and therefore represents a high degree of O-motive. “Strong” and “confident”, “enlightened happy” demonstrates a clear standpoint for the future, and so indicates high levels of S-motive. Undoubtedly, this position represents a high level of positive feelings.

The communicational give and take between the author and his hero forms the basis of the VFP; the author on the threshold of the actual and fictional world visits the “man in man” within himself and fulfils the process of becoming. Both the author and his hero benefit from their dialogical exchange. This creative influence in the construction of subjecthood causes Orr to settle his ambiguities over Grace’s past and to live “happily” and satisfied.

Orr appreciates the present moment and accepts the fact that the “past is past” (p. 34), he thus develops an “I-as-accepting position”. An “accepting” position helps to redefine existing positions and reorganize the repertoire into a healthier one. He is accepting the truth. Therefore, he is now free and enlightened and cherishes his new chance to live again in a better and happier life.



Table 5  
*VFP in the dialogical confrontation between "Ignorantly Happy" and "Enlightened Happy" (Adapted from Hermans, 2002b)*

Valuations from the Perspective of "Ignorantly Happy"		Valuations from the Perspective of "Enlightened Happy"	
Past (memories of the past)		Past (memories of the past)	
1.	I had a near-fatal accident a year ago.	-----	
2.	I fell in love with Grace at first sight.		
Present (experiences in the present)		Present (experiences in the present)	
1.	In one of my walks near the house, I bought a blue notebook from an exotic stationery store, "Paper Palace".	1.	I am in my room, where I am typing the manuscript of my novel.
1.	I am recovering and have started writing again.	2.	I visit an old album of photos of Grace. I contemplate my wife's past life, trying to know her, and therefore myself, better, in a new light.
2.	I am very thoughtful about my own position in my actual life, as I am narrating the life story of Bowen after the lightning incident.	3.	I write an imaginary account of my wife's romantic affair with John.
3.	I feel lonely, though I have a lovely wife whom I worship. I feel love and affection towards my wife.	4.	I am ready to confront the reality of my life.
4.	I feel at times I don't know anything about my wife, as she is not willing to share her secrets and emotions with me.	5.	I believe now that there is a close relation between imagination and reality, fact and fiction.
5.	I narrate a story about how my wife and our family friend, John, may have had an affair. I feel like a "fool, an ex-cuckolded husband".	6.	I understand that although Grace and John loved each other before my marriage to Grace, and also there was a one-time mistake when I was in hospital, Grace wants to stay married to me and relies on my trust in her and our marriage.
6.	I let myself go one night in the hands of an African girl in a sex club.		
Future (desires and anxieties for future)		Future (desires and anxieties for future)	
1.	I intend to follow Grace's simple instruction and keep on loving her.	1.	Writing is for me better than any other treatment. I go on writing.
		2.	I go to visit my wife at the hospital. I feel happy after all these sad incidents.
		3.	I am certain and confident about myself and my love for Grace. I know I will never let my "Grace" go.

Table 6  
*Affective connotations in the “Ignorantly Happy” and the “Enlightened Happy” (Adapted from Hermans, 2001b)*

	S	O	P	N
Ignorantly Happy	Low	High	Low	High
Enlightened Happy	High	High	High	Low

*Note.* S: affect describes the level of self-enhancement; O: affect describes the level of craving contact with others; P: describes the level of positive feelings; N affect describes the level of negative feelings. The general feelings of each position in relation to the affective indices are indicated by an ordinal scale of low/ medium/ high.

**CONCLUSION**

Sidney Orr, whose name also puns on uncertainty and ambivalence, is a shattered man on a quest to find truth and overcome his life uncertainties in a world that illustrates the discomforting anxiety of the postmodern era. The postmodern “blue man” encounters two great dilemmas in his life, one fictional, the other factual; the former deals with the hero’s fate and the latter with his marriage, the issues of “love” and “contact and union” with loved ones. Contrary to Bowen, who seeks this “unity” and “love” outside of his marriage domain, Orr chooses to stay loyal to his wife and to restore their relationship of trust.

The freedom-seeker side – freedom from his actual life and freedom to be the “other” – of Orr, that acts as a meta-position, facilitates the integration and unity of the repertoire by generating an influential dialogical relation between the positions affected by the postmodern self. The confrontation of the author with his hero from the viewpoint of “I-as-blue man” and “I-as lightning man” is identified as the “core act of coalition”. The “ignorantly happy” and the “blue man” that seem to

be the prevailing positions progressively give way to other positions that fit more positively into Orr’s self-space. Positive personal valuations, from the perspective of an “accepting position” and “enlightened happy”, surface effectively.

Orr is now ready to move on from the past and to develop new infinite possibilities in his marriage to Grace in the future. Under the impression of a dynamic course of positioning and repositioning, Orr’s postmodern self as “I-as-artist/ novelist” transcends into a dialogical self. Orr responds to his postmodern situation in quite a dialogical way by letting go of the past, dealing with the present and generating a positive perspective for the future.

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