

**I Write, Therefore I Am: The Rise of Post-Postmodernism
and the Author-Narrator**

by

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For literary scholars whose preferred field is contemporary literature, there are many benefits which do not exist for those who study the works of past periods, along with many challenges. These scholars, often being amongst the first ones to offer critical insights into the works being produced in the twenty-first century, are less likely to run into the dilemma of having to find new points of exploration for texts which have already been thoroughly explored by those who came before. The counter to that benefit is the fact that it can be difficult to fully understand a novel if the person reading it lacks a firm understanding of the context in which it was produced. That can apply to the social conditions of the period, but it can also apply to the contemporary developments in the wider field of literature which may be inspiring the authors of the works in question. We can look to past periods (whether it be romanticism, modernism, postmodernism, etc.) with a fairly developed understanding of the key characteristics which defined the works of those periods thanks to the insights provided to use by the scholars who helped to define them. But today there is a growing perception amongst scholars that literature has moved away from the postmodern movement that dominated fiction for such a lengthy amount of time following World War II and is currently in the early stages of an entirely new period. Stephen Burn makes just such a claim in describing the critical consensus of the time: “From the very start of the 1990s both critics and writers seemed eager to draw a line under the postmodern era in the hope of defining a new imaginative space for fiction” (10). Of course,

most literary movements act as an evolution of what came before rather than a complete departure from it, so we can certainly detect some of the traits of earlier periods in contemporary works. But in order to make sense of how these new texts may operate differently from the novels of generations past, we must try to get a sense of how this new “post-postmodern” period may differ from the literary movements of the past as well.

The best thing that anybody can do to get a clear sense of what has changed and what has evolved as we move beyond postmodernism is to look for any commonalities that may be noticeable amongst the literature which has been produced over the past couple of decades. Such commonalities may occur in the form of reoccurring stylistic structures or narrative themes; in one particularly noteworthy example of a common trend, we see examples of both of these types of shifts. A large number of contemporary novels which have garnered attention and praise from scholarly and general audiences alike have utilized a narrative device in which the text is presented as the creation of one or more of the novel’s primary characters. One might be inclined to assume that such a description describes any first-person narration, but there is a key difference in intent at the heart of the story being told; in a more traditional first-person narration, we are not always given a direct reason for why the story in question is being told or to whom it is being told. But the issue of intent is a key focus in the “author-narrator” narrative device in a way that is not seen in any other type of narration; these characters, for one reason or another, are compelled to write out their stories, and there are any number of questions which we might be compelled to ask about the narrative as a result of this choice. What tangible reason do they have to be going through the effort of producing this text? Do they have a specific audience in mind? What do we learn about the fictional author through their efforts to shape the narrative? Can we be wholly convinced that they are presenting events as they genuinely occurred? And

what is the end result of their efforts? A real-world author who utilizes this device doesn't necessarily have to compose their novel with these questions in mind; it can occasionally be a matter-of-fact justification for presenting the story, and our understanding of the fictional author and his or her subsequent narrative may not be influenced all that much by the choice. But more often than not, the recent novels that utilized this device—ranging from Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000) to Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), from Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) to Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), etc.—have made its use an essential part of the story they are trying to tell and the themes that they are trying to touch upon. These key questions of motivation, audience, and style are ones which fundamentally shape our understanding of these different texts, and while they all do vary in subject matter and perspective, their shared method of narration nevertheless results in more similarities than we might initially expect, which we will observe upon further examination. And thus as we try to define the key characteristics of this post-postmodern period, it is incumbent upon us to take note of the fact that all of these real-world authors felt it worthwhile to use this device to create their novels, and to understand why they might have felt it the best possible method for doing so.

It would, of course, be a mistake to suggest that this narrative device is an invention of the post-postmodern period. The concept of the author-narrator has been around in some form or another for centuries, and if we look at its evolution over that time period, we can see that the manner in which it is utilized will often reflect the trends and philosophies of the periods in which it is employed. If we want to see how this device operated differently in the distant past, for instance, we can look to the Victorian period in which Gothic and sensation novels were the popular trends of the period. With these works emphasizing dramatic mysteries and shocking

plot twists, there is bound to be a desire on the part of the reader to immerse themselves into these grotesque realities where such fantastic circumstances are well within the realm of feasibility. The author-narrator device is thus often used in classic epistolary novels—a genre which could be considered a sub-category within the broader narrative device—as a method for creating a greater illusion of reality to the events being described, as the fictional writers are compelled to write their stories for the sake of enlightening people about the audacious events which have occurred. In analyzing what she calls the “realist fantasy” created by the authors of this period, Audrey Jaffe offers an indirect definition of the effect at play here, as she states that “Material and spatial constructions that simultaneously invite and exclude... are themselves seductively ‘real’-seeming ideological forms. Such constructions, that is, locate the real in the manifestations of substance and solidity the Victorians prized” (4); these works, she subsequently goes on to say, “represent not the real but the desire for it, and in doing so render it desirable for readers as well” (5). While not explicitly discussing the author-narrator device, its use in some of the works of this period—whether it be in minor ways (like Charlotte Bronte presenting *Jane Eyre* as an autobiography, albeit only occasionally calling explicit attention to Jane’s role as the storyteller) or big ones (Wilkie Collins shifting author-narrators and perspectives numerous times in *The Woman in White*)—does serve the “desire for the real” that Jaffe describes here. In writing out descriptions of their experiences, the fictional authors of many of these works often seek to make sense of the mysteries that plague the narratives, and in doing so present them as things which might have actually occurred in the real world. Solidifying the truth of the events being described in the minds of the reader is in many ways the opposite of how the author-narrator device will be used later on, as we will see, which does go to show both

its adaptability and longevity as a narrative device which has survived and evolved throughout centuries of literary development.

The other period whose usage of the author-narrator device warrants consideration, since it is the most immediate precedent to our contemporary times, is the postmodern period. Its deployment of the device differs sharply from the aforementioned Victorian usage of it, as rather than adding a sense of realism to the events being described, its usage in works like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*, and Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* instead forces the reader to question many different aspects of the authenticity of the narrative being provided to us. This shift makes sense when we consider the various different literary theories which helped bring about the rise of postmodernism:

In decentering thought, truth, and authority (Nietzsche), emphasizing our "thrownness" into a world/culture that shapes us without our consent and from which we are inseparable (Heidegger), viewing, like Nietzsche, truth as a function of power and dispersing it horizontally into the multitudes (Foucault), and describing the self as divided, even beyond Freud's tripartite division, because of its constitution by already self-divided language (Lacan), this philosophical strain of antihumanism sought to recognize a fundamental unknowability, particularity, and multiplicity in truth and identity that would end the marginalization, reductiveness, conservatism, and colonialism of humanist ways of thinking. (Holland 4)

These theoretical shifts played a large role in the rise of metafiction, a genre for which the author-narrator is wholly suited. And indeed, the texts which utilized that device are wholly in-line with the philosophies espoused by these theorists. In explicitly calling attention to the acts of writing and storytelling in their novels, real-world writers like Salman Rushdie and Philip Roth

emphasize that the narratives we are reading are only the representation of the subjective realities of their fictional creations, and those representations are subject to conscious or subconscious tampering which makes it impossible to know what is real and what is not. The efforts of these fictional authors, then, provide us with far more questions than answers, as they call attention to the ways in which our perception of the world and even our very identities is illusory and performative. With these shifts, postmodernism begins to show how the author-narrator device can be used in exciting and thought-provoking ways to force us to ask more questions about the events being described to us in these works of fiction, setting the stage for its prevalent utilization in the post-postmodern movement.

Just as these different literary periods evolve from one another, so too does the author-narrator device evolve from the ways in which it was used in the past, meaning that many of the traits described from previous periods continue to have a presence in some shape or form; in contemporary novels, the fictional writers often wish to assert that the events being described did in fact occur, as is the case in Victorian fiction, and it continues to pose the same questions about subjectivity and reality that postmodernism poses. It's not enough, then, to simply note that post-postmodernism has thus far demonstrated a significant interest in the usage of the author-narrator device; in order to understand how this new period utilizes this technique differently—and, I will argue, more effectively—we have to understand how its usage connects with the other traits which may well come to define the movement. And amongst the numerous different ones which scholars have already identified as being prevalent in these modern works, one of the most noteworthy ones is the emphasis on a return to a humanistic perspective, something which most consider to have been lacking in postmodernism. Mary Holland, after previously describing the antihumanistic traits of postmodern, goes on to explain the ways in which post-postmodernism is

operating differently: “Literature of the twenty-first century... converts repressed humanist struggle via antihumanist language into overtly sentimental deployments of language as an essentially humanist endeavor” (7). In making this statement, she is inadvertently describing the fictional author-narrators of numerous contemporary texts just as much as she is describing their real-world authors. Because while there are any number of differences between author-narrators like Yunion de Las Casas, Iris Chase, Briony Tallis, Nao Yasutani, Cal Stephanides, and numerous others, the quality which they and their writings all share is a desire to open up about their struggles in a way that has been denied to them in their own lives. After all, viewed in strictly logical terms, most writing must be done with the idea that the thoughts being expressed hold some measure of value to someone, or else there would be no point in the effort; similarly, while one could offer any number of different specific definitions of humanism, any reasonable one must begin with the assumption that each person is worthy of a certain amount of dignity and respect. If we accept both of those premises, then writing itself is an inherently humanist act, a method of attempting (if not always succeeding; a key distinction, as there is no guarantee of success) to convey meaning to others. That’s just what these different fictional authors are doing, as they all aim to provide a voice to the voiceless, and in doing so assert the fact that their struggles—and they as individuals—matter, that they have meaning. Post-postmodernism has not lost the skepticism towards grand narratives and absolute truth that defined its predecessor, but it seeks to match those qualities with a willingness to fight back against the void of irony and nihilism which can often drown the characters of postmodern novels. The author-narrator device acts as the perfect tool for accomplishing this goal, as it combines a structure which invites self-reference and interrogation with a keenly-felt desire for the resulting text to leave the fictional authors better off than when they started their task.

The goal here, then, is two-fold: in order to understand the direction in which post-postmodernism is heading, we need to understand this device that is continuously being used in the books that may, for all we know, eventually come to be described as its epitome the same way that *Ulysses* epitomizes modernism and *Gravity's Rainbow* epitomizes postmodernism. In digging into the various elements of the author-narrator device—what we learn about the fictional authors through their writing, how the relationship between fictional writer and fictional audience impacts the larger narrative, how and why the storyteller may deviate from the truth, what tangible outcome occurs as the result of the effort that the author-narrator went through, etc.—we will continuously see that these elements of the device enhance the humanistic yearnings of the overall texts. In comparing how texts like *Atonement*, *Oscar Wao*, *A Tale for the Time Being*, and *The Blind Assassin* (amongst others) differ from past texts which used the same device in different ways—whether it be *The Woman in White* for the Victorian period or *The Counterlife* for the postmodern—we will see that post-postmodernism is uniquely positioned to utilize the author-narrator in ways which it has never quite been utilized before. And in making these observations, we will come to a still imperfect but ultimately improved understanding of this evolving post-postmodern period as one which offers endless possibilities for authors to simultaneously embrace ambiguity and authenticity, irreverence and values, conflict and resolution.

Humanism and Character

The first step towards understanding the characteristics that are coming to define post-postmodernism is to specify the extent to which its particular definition and embracement of humanism plays a key role in its development; similarly, the first step towards understanding how the use of the author-narrator device in contemporary times differs from its usage in

previous literary periods is to break down how it is being utilized in just such a humanistic manner. The term “humanism” alone is fairly general, and it can suggest a more overly simplistic and unearned sentimental approach than most post-postmodern literature utilizes; after all, the rejection of grand narratives and overly simplistic moral messages which postmodernism embraced hasn’t been altogether done away with just yet, so any reader expecting literature which offers obstacles which are easily overcome by the simple triumph of the human spirit and a wave of happily-ever-after endings will be disappointed by what contemporary works have to offer. But what has become more common in this newer period is a more serious and mindful consideration of the forces which divide and marginalize people in numerous different ways (including but not limited to judgments towards gender, race, nationality, sexuality, socioeconomic status, etc.) and the hope that having honest discussions and examinations concerning these forces can help to at least partially overcome them. This shift in perspective has numerous likely causes; one of the most obvious ones would be the increasing overreliance on irony and cynicism when dealing with such concerns in later works of postmodernism, something most notably disparaged by David Foster Wallace in his famous interview with Larry McCaffery:

If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction’s job is to dramatize what makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still *are* human beings, now. Or can be. This isn’t that it’s fiction’s duty to edify or teach, or make us good little Christians or Republicans... I just think that fiction that isn’t exploring what it means to be human today isn’t good art. (131)

Wallace's words proved prophetic to the rise of post-postmodernism and the type of humanism which is coming to define it; the goal of these works, ultimately, is not to present humanity with easy solutions for the issues that it faces, but rather to emphasize that the struggles we undergo are important and that we can, through sharing these stories and demonstrating empathy, work towards the goal of trying to understand and overcome them, even if only slightly. This mindset sets the stage for the journeys that a lot of post-postmodern protagonists—and particularly author-narrators—undergo in their respective novels.

The other factor which may have played a role in the rise of humanism is a shift in the larger social perspective towards a greater emphasis on social justice, something that writers of all backgrounds have undoubtedly played a part in. Edward Said makes just such a case in his book offering an exploration of humanism in contemporary times: “the writer has taken on more and more of the intellectual's adversarial attributes in such activities as speaking the truth to power, being a witness to persecution and suffering, and supplying a dissenting voice in conflicts with authority” (127). If real-world authors are capable of accomplishing these goals of providing a voice to those who have lost theirs, it stands to reason that fictional authors should be able to as well; indeed, in representing their own stories (and/or the stories of their loved ones) from their own perspective instead of having it represented for them, they are able to more successfully and intimately elucidate the struggles which have held them back from self-actualization. In this way, the author-narrator device is uniquely situated for the post-postmodern period, as the ways in which we learn about a character's identity—complete with their defining characteristics and their personal obstacles—is inevitably going to be altered when that character is the one telling us everything we know about them. Indeed, we may look at the several aspects of the narrator's writing—whether it be in getting a sense of the things they care about through

looking at the choices they make in emphasizing certain perceptions over others or the idiosyncrasies within their writing styles—to give us a more complete sense of their internal identities. And whereas many of the past texts which utilized the author-narrator device may have been able to take advantage of this added layer of characterization to some small extent, it is the post-postmodern texts which are best able to utilize it in their goals of emphasizing a more complex humanism in relation to their characters. In Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, for instance, our perception of the author-narrator is based in large part on his relationship to the stereotypical Dominican male identity which he provides to us. And through his writing, we see—sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly—that this relationship is a very complicated one, with Yunior being in some ways the perfect embodiment of the toxic masculinity which is expected of him and in other ways a person who is forced to hide his true character in order to blend in and not suffer the same fate of Oscar, the primary subject of his story. As such, Yunior's writing is presented as, amongst other things, a method for him to reclaim his identity, and the extent to which his storytelling accomplishes this tells us a great deal about how this narrative device can be utilized to simultaneously deepen our understanding of the characters it portrays and contribute to post-postmodernism's commitment to speaking up for those who are marginalized and divided.

One of *Oscar Wao*'s primary concerns is particularly relevant to the brand of humanism which seeks to understand the forces which divide us from one another: the extent to which societal expectations inform the formation of our identities and how those who deviate away from those expectations are often rejected as a result. In particular, we see how Dominican men must conform to certain norms of behavior—acting tough, crassly pursuing women, foregoing intellectual or “nerdy” pursuits, etc.—lest they be ostracized for their deviations the way the

titular Oscar is. While we do see Yuni6r display these characteristics through his descriptions of his own actions, the more telling glimpse we get of him is simply through the personality he displays in his writing. Unlike his everyday actions, the text which he is composing—something which is not necessarily intended for public consumption—is not being directly influenced by how he thinks others might perceive it. As such, his writing acts as an unfiltered glimpse into his mindset, and the picture we see is one which is a full-blown display of toxic masculinity. Indeed, his internal perspective as demonstrated in his storytelling shows us a person who traffics in vulgarity and misogyny. Both English and Spanish slang and curses are used liberally throughout the narrative, which already makes the narration a far cry from the more formal—i.e. more detached and Anglocentric, and far less reliant on colloquialisms and slang—type we might generally expect from literature. Perhaps even more alarming is the ease with which Yuni6r demeans and disparages other; women are the most common victim, with him using any number of demeaning terms—ranging from “slutties” (172) for his romantic conquests to “fucking bitch” (182) for someone who rebuffed him. Even Oscar, the person for whom he is going through all of this effort and who indeed does generate a measure of respect from him, is still subjected to being called at various times a “fucking dork” (169) and other such variances. Yuni6r taking part in diminishing others when, as we will see, the same thing is happening to himself and others like him is an unfortunate depiction of a vicious cycle of self-marginalization which is all too prevalent in the larger social realm. But in describing the expectations that were placed upon Oscar as a Dominican male, he inadvertently describes the circumstances which allowed for the cultivation of this identity:

Anywhere else his triple-zero batting average with the ladies might have passed without comment, but this is a Dominican kid we’re talking about, in a Dominican family: dude

was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands. Everybody noticed his lack of game and because they were Dominican everybody talked about it. (24)

Yunior, being a more socially conscious person than Oscar, was firmly aware of how those who did not engage in the kind of womanizing behavior expected of him would result in being ostracized, and he molded his behavior accordingly. In doing so, however, he became a propagator of that cycle of cultural expectation through his negative views towards both women and those who did not conform as he did, and these views left him struggling to connect with people like Lola and Oscar as well as he potentially could have. He rarely explicitly tells us any of this, but his writing paints a clear picture, and it gives us an initial sense of the ethos under which the post-postmodern period's usage of the author-narrator device operates. In giving us a clearer sense of both intent—the authenticity of his personality being clear by the circumstances in which he is writing, unlike in a standard first-person narration—and style—in allowing the idiosyncrasies of his persona to shine through without the layer of detachment that a third-person narrator would necessitate—in the events being described to us, we get a much clearer understanding of his identity and a greater sense of how that identity has been altered (predominantly for the worse) by his social circumstances.

Another key element of the type of humanism which post-postmodernism pursues is the embracement of the complexities inherent to a person's internal identity, which means understanding the various factors which played a role in their development and acknowledging the different aspects of their character which may be at war with each other. These concerns firmly applies to Yunior given the contradictions at the heart of his personality. All of the previously established elements of his character are immediately evident on the surface;

however, it is also immediately evident that this image of the brash alpha male which he presents to the outside world is not all that is there. Indeed, Yuniór makes a few brief references to his interest in some of the same forms of media that Oscar enjoys, but those minor asides do not give us nearly as large a sense of the full scope of his inherent nerdiness as his writing does. We must remember throughout the entirety of the novel that everything being presented to us represents his own point of view, and thus any intertextuality present is the result of his own personal tastes and predilections, at least within the fictional realm. Thus, the references to popular culture in the science-fiction and fantasy genres—from superhero comic books such as the Fantastic Four to fantasy novels such as *Lord of the Rings*—which are prevalent throughout the entire narrative must be understood not as a demonstration of Díaz's literary fancies, but Yuniór's. And these references often act as a lenses through which to view essential parts of the story, whether that be in comparing Oscar's plight to that of an X-Man or in using various villains (Sauron, Gorilla Grod, Solomon Grundy, etc.) to describe antagonists. All of these different choices makes for a rather noticeable contradiction from the person who looked down upon Oscar for his interests; as Sean P. O'Brien states in describing the geeky narration, "Yuniór's decisions as a narrator are foregrounded as part of the content of the novel: Yuniór doesn't want us to dwell on how geeky he is, yet he chooses a narratorial voice drenched in genre references, and even draws attention to his geekiness by explicitly commenting on it" (85). In writing for a more private audience, Yuniór presents a more authentic voice than the one which he might present to the outside world, and while the elements of his vulgarity and misogyny may still be there, we also see a new and different side to him, one which makes it easier to understand how he may have connected with Oscar in the first place. He does draw a direct connection between himself and Oscar when contemplating how their youths had gone very differently: "Perhaps if like me he'd been able to

hide his otakuness maybe shit would have been easier for him, but he couldn't" (21). The suggestion here is that, just as there may have been a path for Oscar to be more like Yuniór, there may also have been a path for Yuniór to be more like Oscar had he embraced his interests instead of running from them. Seeing the extent to which Yuniór's developed toxic masculinity has hampered his ability to connect with others does enough to tell us how his internal marginalization has harmed him, but seeing his genuine nerdiness expose itself through his writing gives us a greater sense of how things may have been different if he had grown up under different circumstances, and thus the sense of loss is even greater. If, on the other hand, Yuniór's story was simply being represented for him by someone else, or if his writing had been intended for public consumption and he had thus had more of a motivation to alter his approach for that audience, this intimate glimpse into the privately nerdy mindset that he possesses would likely have never been displayed to us. Post-postmodernism's brand of humanism compels us to mourn the loss of the happier and more authentic individual Yuniór could have been were it not for the social norms which compelled him to reject that path, and were it not for his writing the extent of that rejection would not have been as clearly felt by the reader.

The complexity behind the inherent conflict in Yuniór's writing—the war between the alpha male and the closeted nerd—is itself indicative of the power of the author-narrator device when it is utilized effectively. And beyond that, it demonstrates how that device can be used to address the humanistic concerns of post-postmodern literature. As Elena Machado Saez states, "Yuniór's insecurities as narrator reveal that his investment in telling Oscar's story is motivated by an inability to tell the full story about himself" (524). The full story of Yuniór's identity is rife with nuance, but the persona he has presented to the world is limited by what he believes he can show to the world without drawing persecution, harming himself and those around him in the

process. But whereas a purely postmodern perspective may have been more likely to view this divide as impenetrable, the post-postmodern perspective, being one which “performs recuperative acts against silence and apathy, and does so from within the postmodern condition of image culture, subjectivity, and obsession with representation” (Holland 17), is more committed to seeing these two conflicting identities reconciled, and it presents writing as the method through which that goal can be accomplished. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that amongst the triumphs that Yunior describes of his development into a “new man” by the end of the novel, one of them is his firm commitment to writing: “When I’m not teaching or coaching baseball or going to the gym or hanging out with the wifey I’m at home, writing. These days I write a lot. From can’t see in the morning to can’t see at night. Learned that from Oscar” (326). Writing, after all, is the tool that allows him to take the dimly defined picture of his identity and add detail and definition to it, allowing us as readers to see him in all his nuance in a way that the rest of the world has not been able to see up to this point. In doing so, he asserts his agency and inherent self-worth against a world which tried to take them away from him, something firmly in-line with the goals of post-postmodernism.

Post-postmodernism’s broad investment in marginalized individuals has been fairly prevalent up to this point in the twenty-first century literature landscape. And the texts which utilize the author-narrator device are perhaps best suited for offering us a nuanced and sympathetic portrayal of these types of characters, because their fictional writers are able to use the act of writing to offer the same kind of intensely personal and intimate breakdown of their own personal stories of struggle which we see from Yunior in *Oscar Wao*. In Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*, for instance, our initial perception of the inherent sadness and loneliness behind Nao’s character is clouded by her presentation of herself as a cheerful and playful girl.

The contradiction between these two elements of her identity—a person who admits to suicidal plans while also jocularly discussing her surroundings or her excitement about writing to an unknown reader—is one which initially draws our interest, and the façade slowly evaporates as we learn more and more about her life and she herself becomes more willing to openly acknowledge to her imagined audience the pain that she experiences as a result of her division between American and Japanese cultures and the bullying she is victim to. In another case of a teenaged character's prose illuminating our perception of their identity, we have Christopher Boone in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003). The character himself never expressly announces himself as a person on the spectrum, but everything about his writing style—the matter-of-fact manner in which he describes his actions, his limited comprehension of other people's actions, the usage of mathematical equations and images to convey his thoughts, etc.—tells us that he is one. Being able to get a glimpse into his internal perspective through his writing does a far better job of conveying both the strengths and struggles of a person on the spectrum than a detached third-person narrator could ever hope to accomplish. And then there is also Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015), in which a nameless Vietnamese protagonist in the aftermath of the Vietnam War is caught in-between numerous different cultures and identities—most notably those between the North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese and the East and West—as he writes out his confession. Whereas many outside observers try to pin him down into one set identity—including his intended audience, i.e. the communist captors who are demanding his confession—his consistent conscious and subconscious tendency to offer consideration and sympathy to each different side demonstrates his conflicted sympathetic feelings towards all of them and emphasizes the nuance that goes into defining his true sense of self. In all of these cases (along with many others), the main factors

which are key to our understanding of the author-narrator in comparison to other narrative devices—the motivation behind the writing, the intended audience, the fictional author’s style of writing, etc.—play a key role in determining how we understand the character’s arc, and as a result we gain a much deeper and more intimate sense of the internal struggles that the writers are undergoing as they are telling their stories. The primary result of this knowledge is a greater sympathy and understanding towards their plights as people who, for one reason or another, feel the need to reclaim their sense of self through any small measure that they can manage. This willingness to fight back against the forces of division and despair—as opposed to the cynical and irony-laden acceptance of these forces as inevitabilities in lesser works of postmodernism—strikes at the heart of the motivations behind the post-postmodern movement, and the author-narrator device, in granting us these more nuanced and sympathetic portrayals of marginalized characters, shows us that writing and storytelling can be effective tools for pursuing these goals.

Deviation from Truth

With postmodernism’s rise came a skepticism towards the idea of ever fully and truly knowing what is and is not real and authentic in our perception of reality; as such, the possibility of a truly “objective” narrator—one that could tell us definitively what did and did not occur in any situation without being limited by their own subjectivity—became one which was easier than ever to argue against. And there is no question that the author-narrative device invites open speculation into how fully we should believe in the authenticity of the story being presented to us, as the same general questions which would apply to virtually any narrator—why is this person choosing to present these exact events in this exact manner? Are there any factors which may be consciously or unconsciously influencing the fictional author and subsequently muddying the narrative’s relationship to the truth?—are ones which are amplified when the

narrator openly acknowledges the power he or she wields as the storyteller. Brian Finney acknowledges this inherent dilemma when discussing the nature of the type of self-reflexive fiction which the author-narrator device inherently operates within:

All fiction draws attention to its fictionality by insisting on the particularity of the story it is relating while at the same time implying a connection between the private world it is evoking and the public world inhabited by its readers. But metafiction tends to display rather than to hide the inherent contradiction in the writer's attempt to persuade us of both the particularity and the universality of the characters and events described. (77)

We see this contradiction between the author-narrator's perception of events versus our own perception of their version of events across different works in different periods. Take, for instance, the similar narrative styles utilized in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*; in these cases, both authors are presenting their stories along with the stories of their parents and grandparents. In doing so, both open themselves up to skepticism about the authenticity of their stories; how is it, for instance, that Saleem and Cal—the narrators of these respective novels—can give us such detailed re-tellings of events which they themselves were not present to experience, as they do in describing the experiences of their family members? That is to say nothing of the questions of how they could conceivably be peppering their own stories with inaccuracies based on their subjective perception and flawed memories of events. Saleem is more open about acknowledging these concerns—understandably so, since his story is more fantastical and thus inherently requires more suspension of disbelief on the reader's part—and at one point offers an explanation for why his story, ambiguous as it may be, is ultimately credible: “Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it

creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own" (242). The irony, of course, is that Saleem—along with other author-narrators—is asking us to trust his own version of events, to believe that his version of the truth is close enough to an authentic one that we can place value in what he has to say. But on the whole, what he is saying here rings true: regardless of what changes the author may knowingly or unknowingly make, there is meaning to be deciphered behind the reasoning for those changes. The question we must ask ourselves, then, is how that meaning contributes to our understanding of both postmodernism and post-postmodernism; how does the depiction of an ambiguous relationship to the truth by Rushdie and other postmodern writers who utilize the author-narrative device differ from writers like Eugenides, who operate in a time when such ambiguity is still pursued, but paired with a newfound willingness to simultaneously pursue concepts of sincerity and authenticity? In order for the post-postmodern usage of the narrative device to evolve, contemporary writers must examine the ways in which a fictional writer's conscious or subconscious alterations of the events being described can interject with the broad considerations of the author-narrator device—the extent to which factors like the motivations of the fictional authors and intended audience play in the text's composition—in order to contribute to its efforts to embrace its particular brand of humanism and convey meaning and empathy behind the characters' whose stories are being told.

Midnight's Children and *Middlesex* do provide us with a glimpse into the issue of how we factor the author-narrator's subjectivity and potential deviations from the truth into our understanding of the story within the postmodern and post-postmodern periods; they are not, however, the texts which provide us the best example. That honor belongs to Philip Roth's *The*

Counterlife and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, two novels which, like the aforementioned duo, are remarkably similar to one another at the surface level in their use of the author-narrative device. Indeed, its use in both texts significantly amplifies the aforementioned questions about the authenticity of the story presented to us, as we are first presented with a story (and in Roth's case, with multiple stories, each of them logically incompatible with one another) only to eventually be told that these stories are merely the invention of the fictional author's imagination. Indeed, both novels end with their respective authors—Nathan Zuckerman for *Counterlife*, and Briony for *Atonement*—rationalizing their reasons for creating the fiction which we have just read and spent some portion of the novel believing, only to have had the rug pulled out from under our feet. In spite of these obvious similarities, it is difficult to imagine a reader having the same emotional and/or intellectual reaction upon finishing the two books; on the contrary, those reactions are bound to be quite opposite from one another. The reason for that differentiation is because both texts and their usage of the author-narrator device are wholly adherent to the philosophies regarding the “truth” of their respective periods (postmodernism for the 80s-era *Counterlife* and post-postmodernism for the twenty-first century *Atonement*). Given the distinct difference in how these different philosophies alter our understanding of each fictional author's deviations from the truth, it is these two texts which provide us with the clearest idea of how post-postmodernism's humanistic use of the device is fundamentally different from what came before: whereas Zuckerman's fiction is based on an outright rejection of an authentic reality and a belief in conflict and contradiction as the natural order, Briony's is instead based on her desire to do justice to those whom she wronged and in doing so achieve an emotional authenticity, a concept which postmodernism may have scoffed at but post-postmodern firmly places its faith in. The efforts by the fictional writers to alter the realities

presented in their writings, then, is sharply distinctive in spite of their surface-level similarities, as one alters the truth out of a belief in the inherent humanity of its primary characters and the other out of a lack of such a belief.

While there is a continuously evolving perception on the status of the “truth” behind the various narratives of *The Counterlife*—with new versions and contradictions being presented at different points, including both Henry and Nathan Zuckerman alternating between being alive and dead depending on the narrative—it is the conclusion of the novel where we seemingly get the clearest picture of what is objectively real and what is not. This conclusion comes in the form of two letters displaying an argument about Nathan’s compulsive need to alter the truth and add conflict and disorder in his writing, with “Maria”—the name being one of his many inventions—calling him to task for it: “But tranquility is disquieting to you, Nathan, in writing particularly—it’s bad art to you, far too comfortable for the reader and certainly for yourself. The last thing you want is to make your readers happy, with everything cozy and strifeless, and desire simply fulfilled” (317). These words are merely one small segment of a blistering indictment of Zuckerman’s obsession with exerting his authorial power, something which is so repellent to Maria that she chooses instead to return to an unloving husband whom she nevertheless trusts to operate within the same reality as her. One might expect a response from Zuckerman insisting that he is not as intellectually strident as she makes him out to be and begging for reconciliation, but instead he largely dismisses her emotional pleas and responds by defending his philosophical concepts of the self to justify his fiction:

Being Zuckerman is one long performance and the very opposite of what is thought of as *being* oneself. In fact, those who most seem to be themselves appear to me people impersonating what they think they might like to be, believe they ought to be, or wish to

be taken to be by whomever is setting standards. So in earnest are they that they don't even recognize that being in earnest *is the act*. For certain self-aware people, however, this is not possible: to imagine themselves being themselves, living their own real, authentic, or genuine life, has for them all the aspects of a hallucination. (319-320)

What all of this amounts to is the kind of skepticism against authenticity that defines postmodernism, a belief that life and the "characters" operating within it is little more than a simulacrum in which everyone exerts their own level of authorial control in inventing a fiction of their own identity based on their surroundings. Zuckerman himself acknowledges that he might be taking his philosophy to an extreme (321), and it is particularly noteworthy that he does so, as by the time of the novel's release in 1986, post-postmodernism's rise was on the verge of beginning as a result of too many postmodern writers taking the ideologies of irony and skepticism towards authenticity and sincerity too far, just as Wallace argues to McCaffery. That is not to say that Roth is guilty of doing that, but his fictional creation certainly is; a somewhat confusing distinction, perhaps (similar in many ways to the distinction between real-world author Diaz and fictional author Yunion in the intertextuality presented in *Oscar Wao*), but an important one. Roth is using the author-narrator device to show the dangers of adhering too closely to the kind of skepticism towards reality that postmodernism emphasizes; through Zuckerman's writing, we see how such an adherence can be detrimental to a person's ability to connect and empathize with others.

Of course, in the context established by Zuckerman's explanation of his view of the "act" of reality, the kind of stretching of the truth that he engages in within his writing is only a smaller version of what everybody does in some form or another in their life. And while it may be a somewhat extreme version of it, it is indeed in-line with the ideas that a lot of writers expressed

about the inherent contradictions in identity during the postmodern period; analyzing Roth's efforts to do just that, Eugene Goodheart notes that "A novelist or character or a person in life does not discover a self; he invents it through roles that may not cohere among themselves. The unified self is sheer illusion"; dark as those words may initially seem, Goodheart goes on to clarify that "This is no turn-of-the-century despair and nihilism" (438). And indeed, it doesn't have to be: the ability to eschew any firm commitment to any singular vision of authenticity, either as a writer or a human being, allows one the freedom to choose for themselves what they want to do or who they want to be. It allows Zuckerman to imagine himself the champion against anti-Semitism in the earlier restaurant scene of the novel (to give just one such example of his exaggerations designed to create conflict and intrigue revolving around him), and it is what motivates his suggestion to "Maria" that the two reconcile so they can "pretend to be anything we want" (321). Indeed, the limitless possibilities of a universe dominated by subjectivity and ambiguity once it is acknowledged as such is part of what made the postmodern movement in which *The Counterlife* operates so appealing in the first place. And yet, we cannot ignore the stark reality that there is no reconciliation in store, that Zuckerman's obsession with invention and ambiguity has cost him a real relationship. In this case, the author-narrator's deviation from reality only serves to separate him even further away from the real world and into isolation. In showing us the extent to which Zuckerman is willing to exert his power as the storyteller to change the truth to his whims, Roth offers a compelling argument for the postmodern idea of the self as a subjective construction similar to the construction of an alternative reality via the act of writing; his fictional creation's commitment to this idea, however, means he is unable to recognize the human needs of the people in his life, and the end of the novel shows him paying

for that. Such a wholly antihumanistic outcome as the result of writing and storytelling is entirely antithetical to the motivations of the author-narrators of the post-postmodern period.

So what makes Briony's subversion of the truth different from Zuckerman's, even though they both adhere to the same general concept of presenting fictional events as reality? While that surface-level similarity does exist, it is also fairly evident in the explanations behind their actions that Briony's subversion of the truth—of inventing a scenario where Robbie and Cecilia endured their struggles due to her actions as a child, but ultimately overcame them and were reunited—is done for a very different reason. Whereas Zuckerman's belief was that his deviation from the truth was ultimately in-line with the performative nature of identity, Briony's belief is instead that the truth as she knows it simply has nothing to offer to a hypothetical reader:

How could that constitute an ending? What sense of hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? I couldn't do it to them. I'm too old, too frightened, too much in love with the shred of life I have remaining... I no longer possess the courage of my pessimism. (350)

The idea that being able to provide the true story requires the “courage of pessimism” is perhaps ludicrous to the sensibilities of both the realist author-narrator—who would demand that facts decide the contents of the story above all else—and the postmodern one—whose gravitation towards irony and skepticism could be interpreted as a pessimism in and of itself. But if the post-postmodern use of the author-narrator device is indeed primarily concerned with providing a voice to the voiceless, then the example in *Atonement* would be the most extreme case of that, as the voices being provided belong to those who had them forcibly taken away both through the injustices suffered during life and the ultimate silencing of death. Of course, death is how the

stories of Robbie and Cecilia ended in real, so it would be a mistake to suppose that her storytelling can truly alter that reality in any meaningful way. But instead of allowing that silence to prevail in her writing, Briony's exertion of authorial control seeks to grant them the image of justice they deserved in her own reality. And while the image of justice is not the same as the real thing, Briony—similarly to the anti-realist sentiments expressed by Saleem—offers her own reassurance that the fiction she provided has its own level of truth to it: “I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what *really* happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love” (350). As is the case with Zuckerman, performance creates its own reality: the fictional story of Robbie and Cecilia makes them exist in the hearts and minds of its audience. But whereas Zuckerman's fictitious inventions are done for his benefit to the detriment of others, Briony's motivations are less self-serving and more inspired by the debt she owes to Robbie and Cecilia; she cannot bring them back from the dead, nor can she ever truly attain forgiveness for her mistakes (hence her choice to not even grant herself atonement in the fictional version of events she creates), but in telling the story in a way which does not absolve her of her sins but which does offer an outcome more befitting of the love that the two shared for one another, she offers them a memorial and a display of empathy for the happiness which was taken away from them. A postmodernist skepticism might question the extent to which her gesture has any meaning, but as Finney explains in evaluating the novel, it is perhaps all that she can hope to accomplish:

Robbie and Cecilia's happiness cannot be restored to them by an act of corrective fiction. Nevertheless, the attempt to imagine the feelings of others is perhaps the one corrective that we can make in the face of continuing human suffering. The novel ends on a note of

ambiguity. Yet an appreciation of ambiguity is just what would have prevented Briony from indicting Robbie in her first fictionalized narrative of these events. (82)

Imagining the feelings of others is a kind of reversal to the stance that Zuckerman provides where the “feelings of others” are little more than one aspect of their fictitious performance; indeed, the postmodern skepticism towards authenticity is what allows him to dismiss the concerns of Maria and others who may be bothered by his inventions. But as a creation of post-postmodernism, Briony’s belief in ambiguity is matched by her belief in the essential value in the lives of Robbie and Cecilia, and thus her efforts to diverge from the truth are done in the name of recognizing that value.

Indeed, the extent to which these two texts work in direct contrast with one another in spite of their obvious similarities is positively striking. One text invents conflict, whereas the other invents resolution; *The Counterlife* ends with its pair of lovers torn apart by writing, and *Atonement* with its pair brought together by it (albeit only in the imagination of both its author and audience). And whereas Zuckerman’s fictional storytelling demonstrates the dangers of the postmodern skepticism towards truth and authenticity being taken too far, Briony’s deviations from reality are all done in the name of the humanistic pursuits that is defining post-postmodernism—namely, in an attempt to give Cecilia and Robbie the ending that they deserved rather than the one they got. And her approach in doing this is not all that dissimilar from the other author-narrators in recent years whose writings also have ambiguous relationships between fact and fiction. Margaret Atwood perhaps most directly delves into this point in *The Blind Assassin* when Iris, similarly to Briony, offers her own acknowledgment towards the end of the narrative of the extent to which she has exercised her authorial power to subvert reality. Iris alludes to this first when describing the overall writing process for the fictional book—“I didn’t

think of what I was doing as writing – just writing down. What I remembered, and also what I imagined, which is also the truth” (512)—and then moments later in rationalizing her choice to name her sister the author of the text—“I can’t say Laura didn’t write a word. Technically that’s accurate, but in another sense – what Laura would have called the spiritual sense – you could say she was my collaborator” (512-513). There’s some similarity between the general idea here and what Saleem said regarding the type of truth that subjective memory provides, but when we break it down it has far more relevance to characters like Iris, Briony, Cal, and the other author-narrators in contemporary literature. In the end, whatever deviations from the “truth” these fictional authors make are done with the intent of achieving that “spiritual” truth which Iris describes, a truth which is based upon the connection between the individuals whose stories are being told. And the basis for the belief in that “spiritual truth” is the further belief in “literature’s and theory’s ability to be about something, to matter, to communicate meaning, to foster the sense that language connects us more than it estranges us, so that we can come together in ways that build relationships and community rather than the alienation and solipsism of antihumanistic postmodern literature” (Holland 6). The deviation from the truth of the postmodern author-narrator may be representative of that kind of solipsistic and antihumanistic perspective, but it doesn’t exist in the post-postmodern one, as characters like Briony and Iris engage in fiction as a means for pursuing the kind of humanism which is coming to define contemporary literature.

End Result

Deciphering the motivations behind the fictional writer’s efforts, their intended audience and their desired impact on them, and the decisions they make in presenting the story in the manner that they do are all important factors for understanding the total impact of the author-narrator device on our perception of the text. Ultimately, however, one of the more important

questions regarding its usage is a fairly obvious one: what, when it is all said and done, is gained by the act of writing? If the fictional writer did indeed begin the endeavor with the belief that telling this particular story to this particular audience in this particular manner would ultimately pay dividends in some way, a large part of our interpretation of the novels' endings must be determined by the extent to which they ultimately achieved their goals, an evaluation which has only become more difficult as the author-narrator device has evolved and been utilized in more challenging and ambiguous manners. Back in the Victorian period, for instance, it would have been relatively easy to determine whether or not the endeavor was a success; given that the device was so often utilized as a measure for the character in question to make sense of the mystery at the heart of the narrative, the impact of the fictional author's efforts would have to be determined by whether or not the mystery was resolved in a satisfying manner. More often than not, it was, so the act of writing in novels like *The Woman in White* is thus presented as a weapon of truth and justice. But when we jump to the postmodern period, the device's use as a method of clouding the narrative with a level of subjectivity and ambiguity makes the question of storytelling's impact a far more complicated one. Its fictional authors may begin their effort with some concrete goal in mind—such as *Midnight's Children's* Saleem Sinai, who possesses the same desire of asserting his identity that so many post-postmodern author-narrators possess—but given postmodernism's skepticism towards grand narratives and peaceful resolution, these characters are more likely to end their story with far more outstanding questions than answers, and with any of the hopes that they may have started with being unanswered. So where does that leave post-postmodernism's use of the narrative device? If its goal is indeed to provide its fictional authors with a tool for asserting their identity, then the success or failure of the endeavor must be determined by whether or not the character in question ends their respective

narrative having achieved any kind of resolution to the conflicts which have hampered them to the point of motivating them to tell their story. "Resolution" by necessity has a fairly broad range of meanings; after all, an author-narrator like Iris in *The Blind Assassin* is deceased by the end of the narrative, so even if some kind of moral victory is achieved, the satisfaction we may get from that is necessarily limited. Furthermore, if the fictional writing is intended for a particular audience, then their ultimate perception of the text (versus the author-narrator's hopes for how they will perceive it) also plays a role in whether or not the endeavor was successful; oftentimes we won't even know how the intended audience may respond to it, as is the case with Sabrina in Atwood's novel. Indeed, there are a number of complications behind how we must evaluate the outcome of the post-postmodern author-narrator's efforts, and there's not likely to be a sense of unambiguous victory like there is for the protagonists of many Victorian works like *The Woman in White*. But at the same time, few instances of the contemporary use of the device result in as bleak an outcome as Saleem's; the result instead is often somewhere in-between the two, with no absolute resolutions offered but an appreciation for the fact that exposing the forces which divide and marginalize people does offer the hope of better connecting and empathizing with one another. *The Blind Assassin*'s ending may be darkened by Iris's death, for instance, but her efforts are still ultimately positive when viewed through post-postmodernism's humanistic lenses in that they allow her to express her truth in a way that she has never previously been able to do, and in doing so maintain the hopes of establishing a connection with her granddaughter that will last even after she is gone. Thus, we see the ways in which the post-postmodern usage of the author-narrator device finds the middle ground between offering peaceful resolution ala the Victorian usage and adding conflict and ambiguity ala the postmodern, with the end result being

an endorsement of writing and storytelling as tools which are capable of connecting us through empathy and understanding.

In order to understand the ambiguous success of the act of writing in the post-postmodern period, we should first examine its unambiguous success within the Victorian period. In many ways, Wilkie Collins's use of the author-narrator device is ahead of its time; many writers of the period used the basic epistolary system of narration to recount grave mysteries and show us the internal perspectives of the characters struggling to process them, but *The Woman in White*'s incorporation of numerous different characters with different perspectives towards the events being described and different methods of describing them adds layers of complexity which makes it stand out in comparison with its contemporaries (indeed, one could argue that the impact of subjectivity which Collins allows within the narrative is foreshadowing the evolution that the narrative device will ultimately experience). Nevertheless, the basic motivation behind the fictional text's composition remains largely similar to the other works of the period; in this case, those intentions are made explicitly clear to us towards the very beginning:

If the machinery of the Law could be depended on to fathom every ease of suspicion, and to conduct every process of inquiry, with moderate assistance only from the lubricating influences of oil of gold, the events which fill these pages might have claimed their share of public attention in a Court of Justice. But the law is still, in certain inevitable cases, the pre-engaged servant of the long-purse; and the story is left to be told, for the first time, in this place. As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now. (9)

This early section immediately establishes our expectation of the narrative device as one which will be instrumental in bringing about justice, just as a lawyer's courtroom prosecution against a guilty subject would in reality. Just as the beginning of the novel offers this explicit

acknowledgment of the motivations behind its creation, so too does the ending also openly describe the feeling of accomplishment that Walter feels at the resolution of it: “In writing those last words, I have written all. The pen falters in my hand; the long, happy labour of many months is over!” (627). The mere description of the act of writing as a “long, happy labour” is something which would probably be rejected by the majority of the author-narrators in later literary periods, as it perhaps suggests that the effort of writing is being undertaken with a far greater level of certainty about the likelihood of it resulting in the desired outcome than those future fictional writers may possess. But it generally applies here thanks to the largely happy and peaceful resolution to the narrative, with the mystery of Anne Catherick’s suffering at the hands of Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco having been revealed, Laura’s true identity being returned to her, and her and Walter’s happy marital union. Speaking of Collins’s general philosophy in his detective fiction, Joanne Bridget Simpson explains that he offers “a Realist system which is wholly subjective in its analysis but which allows for the administration of moral justice” (678). That description applies to his usage of the author-narrator device here, as well as its overall usage during the period; there remains room for discussion regarding the extent to which these fictional authors’ subjectivity may be clouding the narrative with some measure of ambiguity, but the end result of their efforts is nevertheless generally a resolution to the conflicts which plagued the narratives and a return to the social order. In this case, the villains whose crimes were intended to be revealed by the fictional writing (Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco) are indeed thwarted and receive their comeuppance, while the characters whose efforts were most instrumental in its composition (Walter, Marian, and Laura) are rewarded with domestic peace. Whereas the author-narrator’s usage would ultimately evolve to offer a more complicated understanding of the endings of the narratives which utilize it, in the case of Collins and other

Victorian writers it emphasizes the philosophy that writing and storytelling can be used as forces of good, an assumption which will be examined in more complex terms in generations to come.

When we jump ahead to the postmodern period, we see the basic compulsion for writing becomes more complicated than the mere desire to resolve a mystery, and the ultimate outcome of those efforts are similarly complicated. *Midnight's Children* provides one of the most notable examples; we can see a similar motivation at the heart of Saleem's motivation for writing as we see in most of the author-narrators of the post-postmodern period, which is a desire to be seen after the world around him has denied him his identity. He and the other children of India have been swallowed up by their country's turmoil in the aftermath of its independence, and he wants the truth (both the fantastical elements of the powers that he and the other midnight's children possess and the more realistic struggles of death, loss, and destruction that he and those around him have experienced throughout their lives) to exist in some form for himself and for those closest to him (i.e. Padme and his adopted son). And yet, we must reconcile this noble goal which inspires his efforts with the rather bleak ending to his story—an ending which he himself consciously chooses after considering numerous alternative possibilities—which suggests that such efforts were ultimately all for naught.

Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, in all good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his, and his who will not be his, until the thousand and first generation, until a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace. (533)

It is an ending passage which is bound to leave us with some measure of disappointment, as it leaves us with no clear sense of how going through the effort of telling his story has had any appreciable impact on his life. It contributes to the overall feeling of helplessness pervading the novel's conclusion; the act of writing, the ending tells us, cannot save him or those around him from being swallowed up by the chaos inherent to their circumstances. It's a sharp contrast to the expectations for the author-narrator that may have been established in earlier periods, where we expect them to present themselves in largely heroic terms and for their writing to show them overcoming any obstacles they may experience. But as John J. Su explains in discussing the form of the novel, Saleem's failure to save himself or others is crucial to our overall understanding of the text:

The opposition between the form and content of the novel suggests neither that pessimistic readings of Saleem's story are inaccurate nor that the endurance of the nation redeems him. Indeed, according to Rushdie's formulation, we come to discover the nation's infinite possibilities only because we are confronted with Saleem's repeated failures and disappointments. Or, to use Rushdie's terms, the nation's powers of regeneration become fully apparent only by drawing a contrast with Saleem's disintegration. (549-550)

Amongst the disappointments described by Su there, at the forefront has to be the failure of his writing to change his life's trajectory or the trajectory of his family and loved ones; the elements which control these peoples' lives—in this case, the path of the nation at large—are larger and stronger than any one individual, and any efforts on the part of the individual to interrupt the natural order of things is not likely to succeed. Writing as presented in *Midnight's Children* and other works of postmodernism, then, is something which can be used in an effort to seek the kind

of human connection and validation that we naturally yearn for, but there are bigger and more consequential forces which make such efforts largely inconsequential. Just as the impact of Saleem's writing is one of failure, so too is the primary impact of the author-narrator device's implementation in postmodernism: a failure to overcome the divisiveness and marginalization inherent to our surroundings.

A lot of the ambiguity surrounding the ultimate impact of the act of storytelling remains prevalent in the post-postmodern period, which we can see in *The Blind Assassin*. There's a lot we don't know about the conclusion of the novel; while it is suggested that Sabrina will be exposed to the text that Iris composed for her, we have no way of definitively knowing if she actually reads it or what her reaction to it may be. Additionally, the act of telling her story does not absolve Iris of her mistakes, nor does it erase the losses that she has endured throughout her life. As such, it would be too much to suggest that her efforts offered an absolute resolution to the guilt and loneliness which plagued her in her life. But as the ending of the novel suggests, she does die with the hopes that her writing will have some kind of impact on its intended reader: "What is it that I'll want from you? Not love: that would be too much to ask. Not forgiveness, which isn't yours to bestow. Only a listener, perhaps; only someone who will see me. Don't prettify me though, whatever else you do: I have no wish to be a decorated skull" (521). This desire to be seen in neither an overly romanticized light nor with the marginalized persona forced upon her all her life is perfectly in line with the measured humanistic pursuits of the post-postmodern period, and it is perfectly understandable given what she has experienced. Iris, after all, was silenced for a large portion of her life by the patriarchal society in which she was expected to be the quiet and unassuming wife to a man she didn't love; her eventual efforts to break free from that system led to her being ostracized and separated from her daughter and

eventually her granddaughter. Her writing out her story represents the best level of resistance that she can possibly accomplish: first in telling the story of her illicit affair with Alex under the guise of fiction created by Laura instead of her, and then in telling her whole life story to an audience (Sabrina) that allows her to show her true self to the one person to whom she most wants to be connected. Without her writing, Iris likely would have died with no hope of ever connecting with her granddaughter and sharing with her (or anyone else) the truth about her life; she might not be around to experience the end result of that, but she is granted the hope that her efforts will both allow her to be seen and that Sabrina can live on with the knowledge of her true ancestry and take something positive away from that. The hope that her granddaughter will learn from her experiences is appropriate, because as J. Brooks Bouson suggests in analyzing the narrative device through which the story is told, the oppression which is being described and ultimately resisted by Iris is one which has a level of truth for all women:

Atwood uses the narrative device of the women's memoir to great effect in *The Blind Assassin*, depicting both the personal and cultural traumas visited on women in a patriarchal society that culturally sanctions misogyny and sexual violence against women. If Atwood, in presenting *The Blind Assassin* as a fictional memoir, calls attention to the blurred boundaries between fiction and autobiography, she also insists on the ability of literature to convey a kind of novelistic "truth" about women's lives. (268)

Therein lies the humanistic philosophy at the heart of both this novel and others within the post-postmodern period: the desire to connect to one another through sharing experiences of trauma and to fight back against the forces which marginalize us, and the belief that writing and storytelling can lead to success in those pursuits. Iris accomplishes this through her writing, and while it does not grant her the kind of happily-ever-after ending that Walter and other author-

narrators of earlier periods might receive, it is also a far more meaningful outcome than that which Saleem and other postmodern ones get. Whereas we should by all objective measures read the novel's conclusion feeling saddened by her death and by the trauma she experienced throughout her life, we also end it being heartened by her final efforts to use writing as a tool for sharing her struggles in the hopes that doing so would bring some amount of resolution for her and her audience.

The same level of measured success to the act of writing is prevalent in the majority of post-postmodern texts which utilize the author-narrator device. Indeed, whereas most key elements of the device are subject to some amount of difference in how exactly they are utilized by these different texts—the exact circumstances which compelled the writing, whether a specific person or more general audience is the targeted reader, the personalities espoused by the characters' writing styles, etc.—this is one point which is nearly universal, as virtually all of these characters begin their efforts with a relatively similar motivation at the heart of any more particular details which may exist for each individual one: they all ultimately want to share and make sense of their struggles and to forcefully proclaim their identity against the forces which may have prevented them from doing so, and they all experience some measure of success which is less prosperous than the happily-ever-after kind of ending that Walter receives but also a far cry from the bleakness of Saleem's fate. To give some examples: *Oscar Wao* ends with its titular character murdered as an end result of the *fuku* that is the struggle with the cultural identity that plagued him throughout his life, but in writing out his story Yunion establishes the hope (albeit not the guarantee) that he and future generations of the de Leon family can be inspired by his story and live their lives without being plagued by the same struggles. Alex from Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) concludes the novel having lost his grandfather

after having been exposed to his past sins and has lost the grandiose aspirations that he possessed when he began the process of sharing his experiences, but he also demonstrates a heightened level of maturity and willingness to be an effective caretaker for his brother which allows us to have some level of optimism about his future. And in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*, Cal ends having shared his struggles with his gender identity with both the general audience and with Julie Kikuchi, and his willingness to be open about his anxieties as a result of his past experiences allows him to enter the early stages of a relationship with the latter (but we, of course, have no real knowledge of how that will ultimately play out). In all of these cases, our interpretations of the novels' endings are tainted slightly by the knowledge that there exists no perfect solution for the struggles that these characters have (and in some cases will continue to) experienced, but they nevertheless all end their journeys, having revealed their traumas and asserted their identities, in a better emotional place than when they began. These and other examples of twenty-first century texts demonstrate the ultimate ethos of the post-postmodern period's use of the author-narrator device. The act of writing cannot definitively save these fictional writers from the forces which have previously held them down, but that it can offer them and their intended audience some measure of closure over what has happened previously and hope for improvement in the future. In this, we see something in-between the Victorian belief that writing and storytelling can offer definitive resolutions to conflicts and the postmodern one that it cannot. They can, post-postmodernism tells us, be used as a force for connection and empathy, and if that is not a perfect solution, then it is nevertheless enough of one to be meaningful.

Indeed, the thing which ultimately makes the contemporary usage of the author-narrator device special is that it embraces everything which makes literature exciting and worthy of exploration in the first place. It speaks to our most basic notion that writing and storytelling are

activities which are capable of offering real, tangible value to us. It accomplishes this feat by directly engaging with the philosophy inherent to the rise of post-postmodernism, beginning with the basic concerns that Wallace elucidated in his conversation with McCaffery: “What’s engaging and artistically real is, taking it as axiomatic that the present is grotesquely materialistic, how is it that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn’t have a price? And can these capacities be made to thrive?” (132). Post-postmodernism’s usage of the author-narrator device does demonstrate the belief in these basic principles—that human beings do indeed have the capacity for joy and charity and genuine connections—and that while the effort to achieve those goals is no easy task, it is nevertheless a worthwhile endeavor. To quote the ending of Laila Lalami’s *The Moor’s Account* (2014), yet another novel which utilizes the device: “Maybe there is no true story, only imagined stories, vague recollections of what we saw and what we heard, what we felt and what we thought. Maybe if our experiences, in all of their glorious, magnificent colors, were somehow added up, they would lead us to the blinding light of the truth” (320-321). The humanism of post-postmodernism espouses the idea that all of our stories are complex and meaningful, and that in sharing them in all their warts and glories we can find genuine meaning within them, and its usage of this narrative device reflects that. Indeed, if the basic ethos of post-postmodernism remains on the same path as its current direction, then it would not be surprising in the slightest to see the author-narrative device be used with the same level of frequency as it has been over the past couple of decades, and it would not be surprising for those future works to offer the same kind of powerful and intimate examinations of marginalized voices that we have seen in this new period thus far.

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