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Home and the Sense of ‘Welcoming’ in Paul Auster’s *Timbuktu*



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Abstract

In *Timbuktu*, Paul Auster presents a very Contemporary novel starring two unusual protagonists who wander the country aimlessly: a vagabond, Willy G. Christmas, and his friend and companion, Mr. Bones, the dog. As a stream of consciousness novel explained from the dog's perspective, the narrative comprehends Mr. Bones' quest for a new home after the death of his master, Willy. In this context, I will discuss through the theoretical perspective of Josep Maria Esquirol and his Philosophy of Proximity that Mr. Bones finds his home in the love and affection that he receives from others. After a close textual analysis, I conclude that, in the end, the dog does not manage to adapt to none of the families he crosses paths with because, from the beginning, his real home has been next to Willy. Moreover, I argue that, for this reason, the dog decides to commit suicide and reunite with his master in death; that is, in 'Timbuktu'.

Keywords: *Timbuktu*, Paul Auster, dog, Philosophy of Proximity, to 'welcome', home, the 'other', affection.

Introduction

As a Postmodernist author of Jewish offspring, Paul Auster's novels have often been considered tales about chance and failure, whose characters wander The United States of America aimlessly, without any purpose in their lives. However, I argue that despite the constant scepticism portrayed in his books, it exists a spark of hope that mitigates this supposed pessimism and even turns it into something meaningful.

Timbuktu (1998) has often been considered a minor novel from Paul Auster. However, I suggest that it gives as the key to understand the previous statement, because it is a very Contemporary novel that follows an old literary tradition —it is explained from the perspective of an animal— and explores the relationship and the intimacy shared between different living beings. The two protagonists of the novel, Willy G. Christmas and Mr. Bones, a vagabond and his dog, are —from my viewpoint— the proof of what Josep Maria Esquirol, a contemporary Catalan philosopher, exposes in his *Philosophy of Proximity*: that humans find their home in the 'welcoming' of their closest relationships; that is, in the 'others'.

When the dog's master dies, Mr. Bones is left alone in the world and, consequently, I argue that the path he undertakes to find a new home is nothing other than a quest for affection or, as Esquirol would say it, a quest to feel 'welcomed' again, a quest for Proximity. Therefore, the analysis of the novel will follow Mr. Bones' quest in a chronological order, since Willy's death, detailing the different experiences lived with other families, until the last realisation of the dog, where he finally finds his true home.

Scholarship concerning the topic of my research is scant and, therefore, my study of *Timbuktu* will take an original focus through a philosophical framework. To do so, I will read Auster's novel, through the theoretical and philosophical perspective of Josep

Maria Esquirol's Philosophy of Proximity —that will be developed in depth in the theoretical framework—. In order to clarify some aspects of the novel I will, moreover, do some comment on the author's Jewish decency in relation with how this affects his literary style and this narrative, *Timbuktu*. Finally, I will also bring some of Paul Auster's thoughts that appear in his novel *Winter Journal* (2012), thus departing from an autobiographical starting point to prove some analysed aspects in the novel.

Theoretical Framework

Before a thorough analysis of *Timbuktu* and its characters is attempted, some terms that make up the main framework of study must be clarified. To do so, in the following section, an account on the meaning of Esquirol's Philosophy of Proximity will be given, thus delving into the philosophical definition of the term 'welcoming'¹. Moreover, a contextualisation of Auster's biography and literary style will be done, thus delving in his Jewish offspring. The framework ends with an approximation of Esquirol's Philosophy of Proximity and the Jewish historical memory.

1. Josep Maria Esquirol's Philosophy of Proximity and the Concept of 'Welcoming'

Is to live, in fact, to resist? We, as humans, work in order to earn money and buy things such as a house to live in, clothes to keep us warm and food to eat —among others—. Take these three basic things away from a person and their existence would, most probably, vanish. Therefore, by striving to acquire these, are we not, then, doing something other than to resist?

¹ The word 'acollir' in philosophical terms is, from my viewpoint, a difficult term to translate since it encloses a kind of moral responsibility in its meaning. From now on I will use the term 'welcome' and its derivatives for the English translation, because it is the word that most resembles it in literary meaning.

The Catalan philosopher Josep Maria Esquirol portrays this idea in *The Intimate Resistance: Essay on a Philosophy of Proximity* (2015)². In the second chapter of the book, “Cartography of Nothingness and Nihilist experience”³, the philosopher will present the axis of one of his main thoughts—which will form the theoretical framework for the main study—. Although, at first sight, this may appear to be a self-help manual, the chapter proves that it is a mistake to affirm that his work is a guide for self-improvement or to find happiness; rather the opposite: it exposes the harsh truth that to escape from the Nihilistic experience in our society is almost impossible. And just for that, “the sense of proximity will never be that of a happy and perfect world”⁴ (Esquirol, 2015: 37). Therefore, in the book, instead of tracing paths to overcome this radical experience, he will list the various factors with which a person must face the simple reality of being alive: the act of sharing, mutual support and the warmth of shelter. Relying on our closest relationships as well as the ordinary ‘things’ that make up our daily lives, we are trying not to fall on what the Catalan qualifies as the worst of the tests: “the disintegration of a being”⁵ (Esquirol, 2015:10):

Esquirol’s work reflects, then, on the human condition and its relations with the world, and delves into the essence of a survivor or, as defined by him, a ‘resistant’⁶. In this context, the philosopher will affirm that “to exist is, in part, to resist. Consequently, ‘intimate resistance’ expresses not merely a circumstantial fact but a way of being, a movement of human existence”⁷ (2015: 9). Also, the philosopher will assert that ‘intimate

² *La Resistència íntima: Assaig sobre una Filosofia de la Proximitat* (2015). As the book is written in Catalan and translated only to Spanish, from now on, all translations to English will be mine.

³ “Cartografia del No-res i Experiència Nihilista”.

⁴ “I just per això, el sentit de la proximitat mai serà el d’un món feliç i perfecte”

⁵ In his own words, Esquirol says “la pitjor de les proves a què la condició humana s’ha de sotmetre és la de la constant *disgregació de l’èsser*” (2015:10).

⁶ This is the nearest translation from the original word in Catalan, which is ‘resistent’.

⁷ “Existir és, en part, resistir. Aleshores la resistència expressa no un mer fet circumstancial sinó una manera de ser, un moviment de l’existència humana”.

resistance' is something unobtrusive and, hence, the 'resistant' will not long for power or to worry about himself, but he will want to serve others (2015: 9).

In this constant concern for our neighbour, Esquirol introduces the concept of 'welcoming'. The philosopher explains that one of the things that a 'resistant' looks for when escaping from the Nihilist experience is the warmth of a home. However, the most important feature of a home "is not so much the comfort, nor the luxury as the 'recollection' and the 'welcome'"⁸ (Esquirol, 2015: 39). In his choosing of the word "welcoming" —in terms of protecting— Esquirol insists on the importance of being with the other. He will mention the Czech philosopher Jan Patocka to conceptualise the idea that "human existence begins in the home, that is the other"⁹ (2015: 48):

The *other*— as well as, in the natural, inevitable mutual bonding, *the others*— is what covers us, thanks to whose help the earth can first become the earth for me, and the sky, the sky —the others are our original *home*. (Patocka 1988, cited in Kohák, 1989: 260).

He will also make allusion to the Argentinian Ernesto Sábato, who will conclude in his book *The Resistance*¹⁰ that, in spite of all the material things that humans can own, we "find salvation in the affection, that is, in everything that is done with the *heart*"¹¹ (Esquirol, 2015: 119-120).

We can see, thus, how Esquirol's meaning on 'welcoming' encloses a hopeful message about love and being with the other; that is, a message about 'companionship'. Esquirol states that 'companionship' is 'welcoming'¹² (2015: 96). Therefore, the people we choose as our life companions do not necessarily have to be literate or to own many

⁸ "No és tant el confort, ni el luxe, com el recolliment i l'acolliment".

⁹ "L'existència humana s'inicia en la casa que és l'altre".

¹⁰ *La Resistencia* (2000).

¹¹ In Esquirol's words, Sábato concludes "que «ens salvem pels afectes», és a dir, per allò que es fa de *cor*".

¹² "Companyonia és acolliment".

material goods; what is most important is the kindness, respect and humility shown to the people that will accompany us on the path of life¹³ (Esquirol, 2015: 97).

2. Auster's Jewish Offspring and Philosophy of Proximity

There are certain elements in Esquirol's Philosophy of Proximity that could be reflected on the Judaist historical memory and, hence, on Paul Auster's life. However, before delving into this affirmation, it is necessary to contextualise some characteristics of Auster's biography and literary style.

The so-called pessimism that can be found in his novels has often been related to Postmodernism, a literary movement whose real definition has been argued and discussed by scholars for many years. Although its meaning, according to Umezurike (2017), has not been ascertained yet, there is a common census that sees Postmodernism as a movement that "builds and destroys at the same time, it brings to birth and sends to the grave and creates and annihilates" (Ozumba 1996, cited in Umezurike 2017: 358). Thereby, it could be argued that Auster's plots fit in this artistic movement because, as Simonetti portrays, his fiction inhabits a "*neutral territory*, a purely subjective (quite autobiographical) dimension always conscious of the difficult negotiation with a historical reality that, though progressively bracketed by metafictional strategies, violently reclaims its actuality through recent traumatic events" (2011: 15).

Nevertheless, according to Simonetti, "Auster considers himself a 'realist' writer", because his works of fiction often include personal and autobiographical elements (2011: 15). Therefore, using elements like "chance, absurd coincidences, bizarre

¹³ The philosopher states that "No cal que els acompanyants siguin persones lletrades (...) Se'ls reconeix no tant per un parlar afectat, melós o paternalista, sinó per la bonesa, pel respecte i per la humilitat envers la persona acompanyada".

connections (...) and all other unlikely elements of everyday life” (Simonetti, 2011: 15) he manages to transform this ‘reality’ into ‘irreality’ (Simonetti, 2011: 15).

Otherwise, the metaphysical dimensions that Auster portrays in his work do not mean that he is not interested in history. In fact, the cynicism and hopelessness found in his plots could be also connected to his Eastern European Jewish heritage, thus bearing much in mind the tragedy of the Holocaust. Auster’s birth, two years after the end of the Second World War, would place him within the current of Post-Shoah writers. However, Auster, in his literature, does not attempt to represent the history of what happened in the concentration camps, thus distancing himself from authors like Bernard Malamud or Philip Roth (Deshmukh, 2014: 128).

As Corwin argues, Auster’s Jewish offspring “is not the most noticeable element in his writing” (2011, cited in Aleksandrowicz 2015: 70). The same author explained in an interview appearing in Aliko Varvogli’s *The World That Is The Book* (2001) that

Judaism is everything I am, it’s where I come from. I feel very attached to the history of the Jewish people, in all its ramifications (...) but I don’t feel any urge to write about Judaism. It’s a part of me which may or may not surface in a book. It’s not my principal source, but rather an element among others which, as much as anything, has left its mark on me.
(Varvogli 2001, cited in Aleksandrowicz 2015: 70)

It can be seen, hence, that although Auster seems to bear the Jewish historical memory very much in mind, he affirms it is not something that will stand out above other themes in his novels.

In this context, we could discern a parallelism between the previous statement and one of the self-auto descriptions that he provides in *Winter Journal* (2012): a “flawed and wounded person, a man who has carried a wound in him from the very beginning” (2012: 15) —an affirmation that could be also related to his Jewish roots—. Consequently, it can be argued that, although not as the core of the narrative, Auster’s Jewish identity —in

historical terms— is embodied in many of his works, an example being *Timbuktu*, the novel that will be studied in this dissertation.

Taking this into consideration, it must be done an approach between the Judaist historical memory and Josep Maria Esquirol's Philosophy of Proximity. As it has been argued, Jewish historical memory is a remarkable feature in Auster's work. Historically, the Jewish people have been a culture of the diaspora, escaping from repression and never finding their place in the world. The embodiment of this particular trait could be found, for example, in the figure of the Wandering Jew, a sinner condemned to wander the globe aimlessly without any kind of hope in finding his own place in the world.

Therefore, as I have mentioned before, Esquirol goes beyond in his Philosophy of Proximity, and affirms that “the effort for subsistence has given way to another way of effort (...). We have gone from the idea of resistance as subsistence to the idea of resistance as ‘recollection’ and shelter towards disintegration”¹⁴ (Esquirol, 2015: 40). Could not, then, exist a parallelism between the Philosophy of Proximity and the many circumstances in which Jewish people have been persecuted and massacred? The antisemitism against Jewish people go from antiquity to the 20th Century. Throughout history, they have been banned from practising their own religion, burning their homes and holy temples; thrown out from their lands, travelling around the globe to find a new place to live; and, most of all, put to death for the simple fact of being Jewish. Relating this through Esquirol's philosophical perspective, it could be affirmed that throughout history, the Jewish people have been eternally searching for a home. Thus, under these

¹⁴“L'esforç per la subsistència ha deixat pas a una altra mena d'esforç (...). Hem passat de la resistència com a subsistència a la resistència com a recolliment i recer davant de les disgregacions”.

disintegrating circumstances, most of the time they have found their only salvation in their families and community.

Analysis of the text

“Good begets good; evil begets evil; and even if the good you give is met by evil, you have no choice but to go on giving better than you get. Otherwise—and these were Willy’s exact words— why bother to go on living?”
(*Timbuktu*, 1998: 124).

Before approaching the analysis of this novel, let me briefly describe the plot. Surely, the person who reads the above quote will not even think about the possibility that it has not been said by a human. In fact, the truth is that this quote belongs to the protagonist’s perspective of the novel *Timbuktu* (1998), Mr. Bones, the dog. Along with his only friend and family, a vagabond who adopts the name of Willy G. Christmas, Paul Auster presents a stream of consciousness novel in which he manages to portray through both characters the universal connections and the intimacy shared between living beings; in this case, a dog and his master.

William Gurevitch is a “genuine, dyed-in-the-wool logomaniac” (*Timbuktu*, 2008: 6) who ruins his university literary studies due to his exposition to alcohol and drugs. One day, by chance, he sees a Christmas commercial and, under the effects of a hallucinatory episode, he believes that Santa Claus, from the screen, speaks to him to reproach his bad conduct and to communicate what will be his new mission in life: “to embody the message of Christmas every day of the year, to ask nothing from the world and give it only love in return” (*Timbuktu*, 2008: 22). Therefore, by adopting the identity of a saint and changing his name to Willy G. Christmas, he decides to become a kind of nomad who wanders the country aimlessly but with a single objective: to spread happiness. At this point, Willy

decides to adopt a dog, Mr. Bones, in order to protect him from the dangers of the world; however, from the beginning, Mr. Bones will become Willy's only and best friend.

The beginning of the novel places us on the day of Willy's death, *in media res*. From this point onwards, the narration will be built around Mr. Bones' memory flashbacks, thus recreating moments and scenes from the past that will construct the two protagonists' identity. After this, the reader will be placed again in Willy's last earthly day. When he finally dies, the narration will follow a chronological order showing Mr. Bones' attempt to try to find the person to whom Willy wanted to trust him; Mrs Swanson, the English teacher. In his quest for a new family, the dog will go through two homes, the first being with a Chinese child, Henry, who will take care of Mr. Bones behind his parents' back. Things go wrong with Henry and, finally, he finds a new family, the Joneses, where it seems that he will be able to rebuild his life. However, in the end it is shown how the family is not as idyllic as it seemed and, therefore, Mr. Bones does not manage to adapt to them. Although the ending is left open for the reader to interpret it, it is understood that Mr. Bones commits suicide in order to meet in death —'Timbuktu'— his real home; that is, Willy.

Even though most of Auster's plots talk about chance, nothing seems to have been put at random in *Timbuktu*. From the names of the protagonists —as we will see below— to each detail of the plot, they all have a value that runs throughout the novel and fills it with meaning. Therefore, it should not be overlooked the case that Willy adopts the surname of Christmas, a festivity that entails to spread love and being with our closest relatives or, as Esquirol puts it, with the 'other'. On the other hand, Mr. Bones is a dog who, generally assumed, adores bones. Thereby, we find two cases of pleonasm that, at the same time, suppose a paradox: Christmas is also a melancholic season, just like Willy; and the dog, such a dog named Bones, thinks like a human.

1. Paul Auster as Mr. Bones and Willy G. Christmas Fellow Wanderer

Before a reading of the novel through the concepts of Esquirol, it will be done an identification between Auster and the two protagonists of the novel. If we follow Esquirol's notion, we can say that Mr. Bones and Willy G. Christmas are 'resistant' due to their precarious situation, where they are exposed to the possibility of experiencing the sense of disintegration. In fact, in *Winter Journal* Paul Auster gives an autobiographical account of the many circumstances in which the author has experienced the human frailty. Starting from the fact that it seems like death has been pursuing him throughout his life—lightning killed his friend a few inches from him and he almost died with all his family in a car accident—Auster describes the first years on his own, after getting divorced from his first wife, as very dark times where panic and desperation ruled his life. Moreover, he sees himself as “a man who walks, a man who has spent his life walking through the streets of cities” (*Winter Journal*, 2012: 59). On the fiftieth anniversary of Franz Kafka's death, an author that has deeply influenced Auster in his writing, he dedicated these words to him:

He wanders towards the promised land. That is to say: he moves from one place to another, and dreams continually of stopping. And because this desire to stop is what haunts him, is what counts most for him, he does not stop. He wanders. That is to say: without the slightest hope of ever going anywhere. (*Collected Prose*, 2003: 473).

As Kohák argues, “though Franz Kafka never ranged very far beyond his native Prague, Auster hails him as a fellow wanderer, a confederate of Mr. Bones, Willy, and the American author himself” (2000: 3).

In that sense, Paul Auster, as an author of Jewish descent, could also be configured as the figure of the Wandering Jew, and outcast within the Christian society whose story has often been associated to the Jewish diaspora. This trait could be, at the same time,

related to Mr. Bones and Willy G. Christmas, two ‘resistants’ who wander around the country without any special purpose in their lives. Therefore, just like the Wandering Jew or the same author —Paul Auster— the two main characters of *Timbuktu* throw themselves to the streets in the hands of destiny¹⁵.

Thus, we can discern a parallel between Paul Auster and his creations which, like him, feel “always lost, always striking out in the wrong direction, always going around in circles...” (Winter Journal, 2012: 56). Consequently, it seems that they are all constantly looking for something —perhaps, for the meaning of life—. However, although this discourse may sound quite pessimist, if we read it through Esquirol’s Philosophy of Proximity to wander around becomes not such a negative aspect for them because, ultimately, they know that they will find comfort in their closest relationships: in Auster’s case, with his family; and in Mr. Bones’ case, with Willy.

2. Philosophy of Proximity in *Timbuktu*

Mr. Bones had been with Willy since his earliest days as a pup, and by now it was next to impossible to imagine a world that did not have his master in it. Every thought, every memory, every particle of the earth and air was saturated with Willy’s presence. (...) Subtract Willy from the world, and the odds were that the world itself would cease to exist. (*Timbuktu*, 2008: 4).

Could anything be more obvious? Just turn around the letters of the word *dog*, and what did you have? The truth, that’s what. (...) If God had sent his son down to earth in the form of a man, why shouldn’t an angel come down to earth in the form of a dog? (*Timbuktu*, 2008: 36).

Mainly, the novel is based on Mr. Bones’ quest for a new home, that is, a quest for proximity if we use Esquirol’s term and, therefore, it could be conceived as a novel about ‘resistance’. After Willy’s death, Mr. Bones’ world collapses: “Splayed out in puppylike

¹⁵ Although, from my viewpoint, the Jewish religious and cultural symbolism in *Timbuktu* could be related in many aspects with the topic of my research, it will not be studied in depth and, therefore, it will be briefly mentioned in this dissertation. I consider that, to deepen this topic, it should be opened another line of research.

innocence, he waited for God to strike him dead, fully prepared to offer himself up as a sacrifice now that his master was gone” (*Timbuktu*, 2018: 97). As his only friend and family is taken away from him by fate, his life will become a race to find the only person in whom Willy had found what resembles as closely to a real maternal figure, Mrs Swanson. However, in the process to find the English teacher, Mr. Bones must face the many dangers of living alone in the street and, hence, he takes refuge in two families in order to find the warmth and shelter that Willy gave him; that is, he is trying to reencounter him in ‘others’.

On the one hand, as it can be seen in the first quote, in Mr. Bones eyes, Willy is like a superior creature, his own God. On the other hand, Willy conceives Mr. Bones as a celestial being, a prodigy with similar or superior capacities than humans. Therefore, if Esquirol’s Philosophy of Proximity is applied, the two protagonists’ tight relationship of friendship and affection would turn their resistance against the Nihilist experience into not such a pessimistic trait.

It must be clarified, nevertheless, that it was not by chance that Willy decided to undertake such a lifestyle, it was his own decision. Willy’s relationship with his parents, David and Ida Gurevitch —two Holocaust survivors—, is described as a nightmare from the beginning, and not because they treated him badly, but because he saw them as “alien, wholly embarrassing creatures, a pair of sore thumbs with their Polish accents and stilted foreign ways” (*Timbuktu*, 2018: 14). When his father died, “Willy’s sorrow was mitigated by a secret sense of relief” (2018: 14), and when he was left alone with his mother, their relationship did not become any better. It was at university that he became completely crazy because of his drug addiction and, after a period in a mental health hospital, he returned to his mum’s flat at Glenwood Avenue.

After the hallucinatory episode where he chose the surname of Christmas, Willy decided to adopt Mr. Bones and undertake the wandering life. Willy's home and everything that surrounds it —that is, his parents— is depicted as gloomy and unappealing for him. According to Esquirol, for those who do not have a house, “the night and the cold are the fiercest of the wild beasts; outstanding features of the inhospitable”¹⁶ (2015 :10). Therefore, given the option of living a normal life in a warm house, why choose the lack of basic resources and be put at the mercy of the cold and the dangers of the street? In his sense of ‘welcoming’ Esquirol portrays the idea that home is found in the ‘other’. In that sense Willy will find his real home in Mr. Bones:

Not only did he feel protected now, and not only did it comfort him to have a warm body to curl up against at night (...) It wasn't just that he knew that Mr. Bones had a soul. He knew that soul to be better than other souls, and the more he saw of it, the more refinement and nobility of spirit he found there (*Timbuktu*, 2018: 35).

Although both characters, in the eyes of society, may seem marginal beings, I suggest that they do not need a house to feel ‘welcomed’ because they both have each other and do not need anything else. Therefore, I argue that Willy only feels admiration and affection towards Mr. Bones, and Mr. Bones cannot conceive a world without Willy: “Subtract Willy from the world, and the odds were that the world itself would cease to exist” (*Timbuktu*, 2008: 4).

With Willy's death, Mr. Bones is left alone in the world. Consequently, in the process of finding someone who will ‘welcome’ him, his life will become that of a survivor, and his ultimate goal will be to feel loved again. However, although he finds

¹⁶ “Per a qui no té casa, la nit i el fred són les més ferotges de les bèsties salvatges; trets sobresortints de l'inhòspit” (Esquirol, 2015: 10).

two places where to be ‘welcomed’ —the Chinese little boy, Henry Chow; and the Jones— he does not manage to adapt to them.

As previously said, the first person that Mr. Bones encounters when Willy dies is a Chinese boy, Henry Chow, who will adopt and take care of him behind his parents’ back. Mr. Bones and Henry met because the latter rescued the dog from being beaten by a gang of children in the park, thus becoming immediately friends. However, Mr. Bones soon realises that his new friendship with Henry will not be as idyllic as he thought: his parents, who run a Chinese restaurant and were barely at home, had absolutely banned him from bringing any animal to their house. Moreover, ignorantly following popular belief, Willy warned Mr. Bones of the consequences of crossing paths with a Chinese restaurant: that he could end up being part of the menu. At this point, Mr. Bones will have to choose between the love that Henry had for him or the fear of knowing that he could be discovered by the family and, conceivably, murdered. However, in the end, he decides to stay with Henry and to live clandestinely inside a cardboard box, in the garden of the Chow’s family restaurant. Mr. Bones, divided between fear and love, told to himself “Run away from this (...), and you’ll die in the streets. Go home with him, and you’ll die there too. But at least, you’ll be with Henry, and if death is everywhere, what difference does it make where you go?” (*Timbuktu*, 2018: 106). If we discern a parallelism between this declaration and the Philosophy of Proximity, it could be agreed that Mr. Bones, as long as he feels ‘welcomed’ and ‘recollected’ by a person, will not be afraid of dying. Therefore, as it can be seen, the dog does not care about the ostentation nor the luxury of a house, his only way of surviving the Nihilistic experience is found in the ‘other’: “Gruesome as those nights were, Mr. Bones would always forget them the moment he set eyes on Henry in the morning” (*Timbuktu*, 2018: 108).

However, as summer came to an end and Henry had to go back to school, Mr. Bones relationship with him mitigated. Henry realised that he would no longer have time to take care of him and, as a consequence, the dog would have to suffer the emptiness of being lonely. In the end, Mr. Chow discovered the truth and Mr. Bones had to leave his friend. However, the paradox lies in the case that, instead of feeling sad, Mr. Bones felt relieved when he left Henry: that is, he realised that if Henry had fully ‘welcomed’ him, he would not have left him alone in that “unendurable” box¹⁷: “if you were treated like an outcast in the very spot was that supposed to be your refuge?” (*Timbuktu*, 2018: 116).

After this sad episode, Mr. Bones decides to leave Baltimore and go to Maryland. He was in the middle of a field when he fell asleep and had a dream about his late master. In this, Mr. Bones has a conversation with Willy in which he reproaches the dog for not having listened to his warnings and encourages him to look for a better master. It is very clear, that in this dream, Mr. Bones is not doing anything but talking to his consciousness, thus, reaffirming his devotion towards Willy: “You are the only one, Willy. But you’re not like other men, and now that you are gone, there isn’t a place on earth where I’m not in danger” (*Timbuktu*, 2018: 121).

The second home he encounters in his quest for Proximity is the Jones’ family. Because of the affection that Mrs. Jones —Polly— and her children —Alice and Tiger— showed to Mr. Bones from the beginning, the dog realises that “Willy G. Christmas was not the only two-leg in the world who could be trusted. It turned out that there were others” (*Timbuktu*, 2018: 133). Nevertheless, the dog could not be accepted in the family unless Mr. Jones, an aeroplane pilot and the father of the family, who was barely at home,

¹⁷ I would like to clarify that Willy allowed Mr. Bones to enter to his house. They spent a couple of years undertaking the wandering life in summer, and in winter they lived in Ms. Gurevitch’s house. It was later that Willy decided to leave the house and live exclusively on the street.

did not approve it. Although Mr. Jones accepts, in the end, he will always keep his distance with the dog, not even letting him enter the house.

It is important to point out that Mr. Bones is used in this episode, from my viewpoint, as an allegorical vehicle to criticise society. In fact, as Varvogli argues, “Auster has explained how using a dog as the centre of consciousness allowed him to ‘express very pure, intense emotions that we all feel’” (2001: 161). At this point, the literary tradition in which the novel is inscribed must be considered. On the one hand, it cannot be a coincidence that the narrator is a dog. Worldwide literary history, from Lucian and Aesop, through Cervantes and all the baggage of the Menippean satire, to Soseki, Kafka and Virginia Woolf, gives us a rich horizon of narrators with animal form. All these literature¹⁸ share, beyond the generic difference, some features that we cannot avoid in Auster’s novel: the first person narration, the distance that objectifies the story and gives it veracity; the possibility of putting in the mouth of an animal what a human could not confess; social criticism and the final moral.

In that sense, Mr. Bones could also be a personification of the Jewish historical memory contributing to the vision of an immigrant who is trying to survive finding his own place in the world¹⁹. As I have mentioned in the Theoretical framework, the Jewish people have been forced throughout history to move around the world from one place to

¹⁸ Specifically, I allude —among others— to the plays of the fabulist and storyteller Aesop (6 B.C.) and his *Fables*; the satirist and rhetorician Lucian of Samosata (2 B.C.), author of works like *Lucius* or *The Ass*; Apuleius (2 B.C.) and *The Golden Ass*; Miguel de Cervantes and his short story ‘The Dialogue of the Dogs’, found in his *Exemplary Stories* (1613); the tradition of the Menippean satire, with representatives like Francisco de Quevedo with *Dreams and Discourses* (1627) or, later, Lewis Carroll with *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865); Natsume Soseki and his satirical novel *I am a Cat* (1905); Franz Kafka and *The Metamorphosis* (1915); and, finally, Virginia Woolf with *Flush: A Biography* (1933). See the ‘Further Reading’ section for information about the editions.

¹⁹ For more information on the topic see Durkin, Anita. “Writing in the Margins: Place and Race in *The Brooklyn Follies* and *Timbuktu*”. In Stefania Ciocia and Jesús A. González (eds.), *The Invention of Illusions: International Perspectives on Paul Auster*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. 55-7

another, without managing to adapt themselves anywhere —mostly because of the ill-treatment received by other non-Jewish people—. In this context, the dog could even be the voice of the same Paul Auster, who in *Winter Journal* talks about the little respect and the difficulties he encountered when he moved to France. Thus, he explains how it was there that he heard for the first time the word *israelite*, used by French people “as a way of distancing the Jews from the French, of turning them into something foreign and exotic, that curious, ancient people from the desert with their funny customs and vengeful, primitive God” (Winter Journal, 2012: 70). In the end, as he did not manage to adapt to the European country, the author decided to return to North America —just like Mr. Bones, who after a few months trying to adapt to new families, he decides to reunite with Willy in death, as it will be proven below—.

It is through the eyes of Mr. Bones that we realise that the Joneses are not as idyllic as they seemed from the beginning. The Joneses would be a characterization of the “happy, all-American suburban family” (Varvogli, 2001: 160): a role model family of four with a stunningly beautiful mother and a father in a good work position who controls every movement that is made in the house. However, on the inside, they present many conflicts that, ultimately, make Mr. Bones unable to accept them. To start with, just like with Henry, Mr. Bones is not allowed to enter the family property and, by doing this, Mr Jones is placing a barrier between his family and the dog. Moreover, what also disturbs Mr. Bones is the fact that he is left completely alone almost the whole day:

Were they simply going to abandon him in the morning and expect him to fend for himself all day? It felt like an obscene joke. He was a dog built for companionship, for the give-and-take of life with others, and he needed to be touched and spoken to, to be part of a world that included more than just himself. Had he walked to the ends of the earth and found this blessed haven only to be spat on by the people who had taken him in? They had turned him into a prisoner. (*Timbuktu*, 2018: 144).

Nevertheless, what is presented as truly clear is the fact that it is the patriarchal figure of Mr. Jones who does not ‘welcome’ Mr. Bones, because Polly and the children are constantly demonstrating all their affection to the dog. Indeed, it could be argued that Mr. Jones does not even ‘welcome’ his own family, because when he is at home, the aura becomes sadder: “There was no question that things were better when Dick was gone. That was a fact of life” (*Timbuktu*, 2018: 155). Mrs. Jones, however, is the character who suffers more on the inside, because she is aware that in her marriage there is not a hint of love left, everything is a montage. If it were not for her children and the dog, Polly would feel alone in the world, because Mr. Jones, in his patriarchal and sexist thinking, considered that “She already had a career (...) Wife and mother was a tough enough job for any woman” (*Timbuktu*, 2018: 159) .

After two and a half months, the dog gets used to the luxurious dynamics of the family and, finally, begins to feel ‘welcomed’. However, the family holidays arrived, and the Joneses left Mr. Bones in a ‘canine’ hotel in order to go to Disneyland. The dog cannot understand this gesture of abandonment because “Willy had never left him behind” (*Timbuktu*, 2018: 168). Therefore, Mr. Bones realises that although he feels wanted by the Joneses, he does not seem necessary to them. This hard blow for the dog causes him an instability that is accentuated once he is locked in the cage of the dog residence. Between delusions, hesitation and nausea, his first night locked up becomes a nightmare: he dreams again about Willy, but this time his dead master forbids him to think about him again. Clearly, this episode is nothing more than Mr. Bones fighting against his conscience, since he feels that in his false adaptation with the Joneses, he completely abandoned Willy in his thoughts.

In this quest for Proximity, we arrive, then, at the end of the novel. Almost without feeling his legs, Mr. Bones escapes the canine hotel and starts running to get back to the

Jones' garden. However, he collapses in the middle of the journey and, again, he has a dream about Willy. The dog, in his subconsciousness, has another conversation with Willy, but this time the old master appears to be calm and friendly and, thus, Mr. Bones concludes that the previous dream was an exam to test him about their friendship. In the conversation they have Willy invites the dog to go to 'Timbuktu' with him; that is, the oasis of dead spirits conceived by Willy which names the title of the novel.

As I see it, it is not a coincidence that Auster has chosen the name 'Timbuktu' to talk about the supposed paradise where the dead go when they die. Timbuktu²⁰ is a city of Mali that in the past was the spiritual and intellectual capital of Islam. However, it has always been the focus of wars and conquests. This paradox is illustrated in Willy's description of 'Timbuktu': although it is a deathly place, everybody is free in the hot and sandy paradise of 'Timbuktu', even dogs. However, as Varvogli argues, "'Timbuktu' of the novel's title is not the real geographical place in Africa; it is the 'Timbuktu' of the phrase 'from here to Timbuktu', an imaginary place with a real name" (2001:162). Therefore, *Timbuktu*, in the eyes of Mr. Bones, would turn a philosophical place "of fear and hope, despair and happiness" (Varvogli, 2001: 162) where "dogs would be able to speak man's language and converse with him (Willy) as an equal" (*Timbuktu*, 2018: 50).

Agitated by the warmth and affection of the dream, Mr. Bones wakes up and decides to follow his master's advice about waiting patiently for his time to go to 'Timbuktu'. However, the dog feels too weak to continue his journey, and decides to approach the highway to see if some car could bring him to the Jones' house. It is at that

²⁰ For more information on the city of Timbuktu, see Scheele, Judith. "A Pilgrimage to Arawan: Religious legitimacy, status, and ownership in Timbuktu". *Journal of the American Ethnological Society*. 40-1, 2013, 165-181.

precise moment, when he sees the road, that Mr. Bones has a revelation that changes his mind on what would be his next step:

Trucks and cars could carry him away from this place, but they could also crush his bones and make him stop breathing for ever. It was all so clear once you took the long view. He didn't have to wait for the time to come; the time was upon him now. All he had to do was step into the road, and he would be in Timbuktu. He would be in the land of words and transparent toasters, in the country of bicycle wheels and burning deserts where dogs talked as equals with men (*Timbuktu*, 2018: 185).

Although the narrative remains unfinished and ends before Mr. Bones gets killed on the highway, that is, before he gets to 'Timbuktu' (Varvogli, 2001: 162), the last line of the novel suggests his intention to commit suicide: "With any luck, he would be with Willy before the day was out" (*Timbuktu*, 2018: 186). From my viewpoint, even though it could seem that the dog has surrendered in his quest for Proximity, I think that he decides to continue it in death, since from the beginning, his real home has always been with Willy²¹. Therefore, all the way he does to try to feel loved again, from Henry to the Joneses, has served him only and exclusively to realise that he was only trying to survive while searching his old master in others. As Josep Maria Esquirol argues, "life is like a kind of separation from the horizontal of the earth; and death, a return home"²² (2015: 42) and, consequently, "to survive is to delay the moment of death"²³ (2015: 47). Therefore, Willy G. Christmas is Mr. Bones real home, the one who has always 'welcomed' him and his only motivation to keep going on.

²¹ Aliko Varvogli suggests in *The World that is the Book: Paul Auster's Fiction* (2001) that Mr. Bones and Willy's relationship could be a metaphor of the warmth and affection that the same author would have liked to have with his father. In *Winter Journal*, Auster explains that his father died before they could improve their relationship. Therefore, Mr. Bones "sacrifice (...) from a desire to be reunited with Willy, (...) restores the father-son relationship" (Varvogli, 2001: 162).

²² "La vida és com una mena de separació de l'horitzontal de la terra; i la mort, un retorn a casa".

²³ "Sobreviure és retardar el moment de la mort".

I would like to finish this dissertation with a passage of Paul Auster's life that appears in *Winter Journal*, where it is portrayed the author's thoughts while having a heart attack:

The oddest thing that has ever happened to you, is that you weren't afraid, you were in fact calm and altogether accepting of the idea that you were about to leave this world, saying to yourself, This is it, you're going to die now, and maybe death isn't as bad as you had thought it was, for here you are in the arms of the woman you love, and if you must die now, consider yourself blessed to have lived as long as fifty years (*Winter Journal*, 2013: 32).

Just like Mr. Bones, the same Paul Auster considers, therefore, that death is not such a pessimistic trait as long as we are with our most precious relatives; that is, as long as we are with the 'others' who 'welcome' us and who become our home.

Conclusion

In *Timbuktu*, Paul Auster presents a very contemporary novel whose innovation is found in the characterization of the two protagonists —a vagabond, Willy; and a dog, Mr. Bones— and in the stream of consciousness narration that intrudes Mr. Bones' thoughts in order to explain the story.

To sum up, this dissertation argues that *Timbuktu*, although it may seem like a pessimistic novel on the outside, hides a powerful message about love and being with the other. Basing my research on the theoretical framework of Josep Maria Esquirol's Philosophy of Proximity I have noticed that after Willy's death, the dog will undergo a process of resistance in order not to fall in the Nihilistic experience. This resistance will be found in the sense of feeling 'welcomed' by our closest relationships; that is, in the 'others'. In this context, I affirm that the novel is constructed around the dog's undertaken quest for Proximity, in which he will cross paths with different people that will make him realise the existing difficulties between human relationships and that he does not need a

material home to feel appreciated. His experience with Henry Chow and the Jones' family will teach him that, no matter how much warmth and affection you receive, if you are put a barrier and treated like an outcast you will never feel fully 'welcomed'. Moreover, to accentuate the instability that does not allow Mr. Bones to fully integrate into the Jones' family, I suggest that the dog is used by Auster as a vehicle to criticise the apparent perfection of the idyllic American family—a figure that would follow an ancient literary tradition based on the use of animals to capture reality or even as the embodiment of the Jewish historical memory and the many difficulties that Jewish people have encountered throughout history to adapt to one place—.

After having analysed each of the experiences undergone by Mr. Bones through Esquirol's Philosophy of Proximity separately, I confirm that, according to my expectations, the dog does not adapt to any of the families because, from the beginning, his real home has been in his master, Willy. Therefore, at the end of the novel, although it may seem that Mr. Bones surrenders, what he is really doing is stopping his earthly quest to continue it in death and reunite with the only person that fully 'welcomed' him in his life; that is, Willy G Christmas.

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