

Original Paper

“Boundary Situations” and Self-Transcendence: Elderly Narratives in *Winter Journal*

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Received: February 19, 2025

Accepted: March 4, 2025

Online Published: March 24, 2025

doi:10.22158/elsr.v6n1p190

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/elsr.v6n1p190>

Abstract

This study focuses on the elderly narrative in Winter Journal by Paul Auster, integrating literary gerontology with the “Third Age—Fourth Age” theory to analyze how the author employs the second-person perspective to depict the multiple dimensions of aging, illness, and death. The paper first examines Auster’s recollection of his living environments and bodily perceptions, highlighting how his interwoven writing of personal memory and socio-historical context endows individual experience with both immediacy and public significance. Subsequently, through an analysis of textual details such as panic attacks and the loss of loved ones, this study elucidates the tension between the decline of bodily functions and the preservation of dignity, underscoring the individual’s persistent pursuit of life’s meaning within boundary situations. Finally, the research argues that Winter Journal not only provides an immersive narrative of elderly memory but also integrates existentialist reflection and sociocultural critique into the memoir tradition, offering multiple insights into how aging individuals resist the encroachments of time and death through narration. Auster’s examination of the “Third Age” and “Fourth Age” further reveals that, despite the dual challenges of physical and psychological deterioration, elderly individuals can still achieve a form of transcendence through language and recollection.

Keywords

Winter Journal, second-person narration, literary gerontology, boundary situations

1. Introduction

After World War II, the United States and other Western countries experienced a period of large-scale population growth known as the “baby boom.” By the 1980s, this generation had gradually entered old age, giving rise to the concepts of the “Third Age” (young old) and the “Fourth Age” (old old). These two classifications represent significant differences in the physiological, psychological, and social needs

of the elderly, becoming central themes in aging literature and its academic research. Meanwhile, structural transformations in society have led to phenomena such as the “empty nest” effect and intergenerational conflicts, further deepening academic interest in aging and its cultural and social implications.

The concept of “literary gerontology” was first systematically proposed by Annie Wyatt-Brown, whose core idea is to approach aging from a “whole-life” perspective. By studying literary works created by elderly artists, literary gerontology seeks to explore their artistic characteristics and life philosophy. This approach not only examines how aging is represented in literary works but also aims to uncover the cultural and social value of aging wisdom, encouraging reflection on how individuals can achieve “successful aging” at different stages of life. “Successful aging” entails not only fully enjoying the benefits of life but also continuing to contribute to society and ultimately accepting natural death with equanimity. Wyatt-Brown’s perspective laid the theoretical foundation for literary gerontology and has driven multidimensional research on aging literature.

Within gerontological theory, the distinction between the “Third Age” and the “Fourth Age” is particularly crucial. The Third Age generally refers to the visible onset of aging following retirement. At the sociocultural level, individuals in this phase retain a certain degree of autonomy and active agency but are simultaneously constrained by various traditional perceptions and social expectations. The Fourth Age, in contrast, emphasizes the gradual decline in self-control, characterized by the loss of essential physiological functions (such as continence) and cognitive faculties (such as memory and intelligence). This stage often entails greater dependency and vulnerability while also prompting deeper reflections on the meaning of life.

In other words, the Fourth Age is not merely a biological process of physical deterioration but also involves an existential dialogue between freedom and death. Even as their capacity for self-control diminishes, many elderly individuals continue to defend their sense of self-worth with their last vestiges of dignity. The significance of this silent yet profound “battle for self-preservation” lies not in whether the individual can “win” but in how they continue to affirm their identity and value in the face of inevitable aging and death. Thus, the Fourth Age is not only the final stage of life’s journey but also an opportunity for deep reflection on the essence of existence, self-awareness, and the meaning of being. It compels individuals to contemplate how to navigate the balance between dependence and autonomy, vulnerability and dignity, in the twilight of life, fostering a more mature and profound attitude toward the present moment.

Within this theoretical framework, memoir and autobiography emerge as pivotal textual forms in gerontological studies. These genres often intertwine retrospection and reflection on individual life trajectories with broader social, cultural, and psychological dimensions. As such, they serve as valuable materials for the study of aging while offering crucial perspectives for understanding elderly identity, emotional experiences, and the evolution of social relationships.

The pioneering insights of Butler are particularly relevant here: he argues that the mechanism of reminiscence constitutes the core of elderly life, as the reconstruction of the past enables older individuals to maintain self-continuity and derive meaning and solace as they approach the end of life (Butler, p. 68). This perspective not only enriches the theoretical framework of gerontological psychology but also provides literary gerontology with valuable insights from psychology and sociology, further advancing interdisciplinary research.

However, in the Western cultural context, which predominantly glorifies youth, the elderly continue to be marginalized, often reduced to symbols associated with “endings” or even “death.” Such cultural phenomena frequently equate aging with decline, revealing a broader societal disregard and underestimation of the wisdom of old age. As May Sarton lamented in *Journal of a Solitude*, “Our spiritual culture does not regard maturity as a form of wealth (Sarton, p. 70).” In contrast, Albert Camus, in his works, celebrates “violent death” (mort violente), viewing it as the ultimate manifestation of life’s passion and meaning (Camus, p. 398). To some extent, this contrast highlights the general absence of natural aging in Western narratives while also revealing humanity’s deep-seated anxiety and avoidance regarding the end of life. Confronted with the vast and enigmatic “black hole” of death, individuals often struggle to fully accept aging and mortality, instead constructing psychological defenses to shield themselves from the ultimate questions of existence.

In reality, it is only by confronting the “absolute” that one can dispel “illusions”; likewise, only through reflection and a compassionate engagement with fear and prejudice can the veils of “Maya” (self-illusion) be gradually lifted. To truly transcend these constraints, individuals must cultivate a more open and critical self-awareness, while at the societal level, a more inclusive attitude toward Third and Fourth Age populations is required. Only through such collective efforts can a cultural and social environment be fostered that supports the holistic and free development of life.

2. The Reproduction of Memory in Second-Person Environmental Narration

2.1 Second-Person Narration and the Construction of Individual Identity

In *Winter Journal*, Paul Auster employs a second-person perspective to retrospectively trace his personal history through more than twenty residences, from East Orange to Brooklyn. Through the interplay of space and memory, Auster explores the mechanisms underlying the formation of personal identity. This approach differs significantly from traditional memoirs: on the one hand, it embeds the trajectory of individual life within a broader historical context; on the other hand, it accentuates the “immediacy” of memory, whereby past experiences are continuously reinterpreted and endowed with new meaning in the process of recollection. This writing strategy aligns with Paul John Eakin’s discussion of “narrative identity,” which emphasizes that an individual’s self-awareness is formed through a continuous process of narration (Eakin, p. 100). Auster’s repeated use of “you” disrupts the conventional limitations of first-person perspectives.

According to research on second-person narration, this mode of storytelling fosters a more direct connection between the reader and the text, thereby enhancing reader immersion (Fludernik, p. 452). In Auster's work, memory is no longer a static display of past facts but rather an ongoing narrative process that actively shapes the self in the present. For example, when describing his experience of wandering through city streets, Auster writes: "Always lost...but most of all the sensation of sidewalks, for that is how you see yourself whenever you stop to think about who you are: a man who walks, a man who has spent his life walking through the streets of cities (Auster, pp. 57-59)." Through this lens, narration and lived experience become intertwined, creating a reading atmosphere of simultaneity. By reproducing past experiences through the second-person perspective, *Winter Journal* allows the past and present to coexist within the text. This effect is particularly evident in the depiction of memory as an immediate sensory experience (Fludernik, p. 460).

Traditional memoirs are often considered records of historical facts, yet they remain inseparable from the subjective reconstruction of reality (Liao, p. 93). Auster is well aware of this and deliberately uses the second-person perspective in *Winter Journal* to bridge the psychological distance between the reader and the narrator, making memory a dynamic site for continuous self-examination and reconstruction.

2.2 Self-Redefinition Through Temporal and Spatial Interweaving

Regarding the interplay between narration and experience, some studies suggest that the second-person perspective provides readers with more opportunities for self-reflection, thus creating new experiential channels between the text and its audience (Fludernik, p. 457). Moreover, Auster's use of second-person narration guides readers through shifts in time and space, thereby blurring the boundaries between self-identity and temporal linearity. This flexibility in sequencing and in the relationship between subject and object allows second-person narration to transcend conventional linear storytelling and invites readers to reassess their own experiences (p. 465). As a result, *Winter Journal* not only presents Auster's past experiences but also engages with his ongoing redefinition of self-awareness in the present.

In the narrative, "you" may refer to the child Auster once was or to his present self, both coexisting within the same textual space: "Your bare feet on the cold floor as you climb out of bed and walk to the window. You are six years old. Outside, snow is falling, and the branches of the trees in the backyard are turning white (Auster, p. 1)." This technique merges past and present emotions into a single textual dimension (Fludernik, p. 460). As Auster shifts between different spatial and temporal moments, he also engages with universal themes such as aging, loss, and death. In this context, second-person narration intensifies the reader's sense of "presence," prompting a deeper engagement with and reflection on their own existence (p. 461). Thus, *Winter Journal* is not merely a retrospective account of private experiences but also a meditation on the meaning of existence. This narrative strategy resonates with contemporary theories of memory and identity, highlighting the unique potential of second-person narration in memoir and autobiographical literature: the process of reading and the text's self-construction occur simultaneously, allowing memory to be expressed in a dynamic and fluid manner.

3. “Boundary Situations” and Self-Perception

3.1 “Boundary Situations” and the Experience of Aging

In *Winter Journal*, Auster employs second-person narration to interweave individual memory, bodily perception, and the passage of time, presenting the past, present, and future in a near-simultaneous coexistence. This narrative technique not only enhances the immersive quality of the text but also transforms aging, illness, and death into tangible experiences for the reader. Unlike traditional memoirs that reconstruct the past in a linear fashion, Auster employs second-person introspection to highlight the helplessness of confronting life’s finitude. In this way, aging is no longer merely a physiological process but becomes a critical factor in shaping self-awareness.

The concept of “boundary situations,” central to phenomenology and existentialist philosophy, underscores the inescapable limits of human existence, including physical decline, the inevitability of death, and cognitive constraints (Jaspers, p. 178). In Auster’s narrative, these limitations manifest not only through his observations of his own bodily changes but also in his recollections of loved ones’ suffering and passing. By frequently using the second-person pronoun “you,” the author intensifies his self-interrogation, simultaneously inviting the reader to confront these existential dilemmas. To some extent, the reader shares the narrator’s anxiety and sense of powerlessness, thereby fostering an emotional resonance between the narrative subject and the reader.

Auster’s use of second-person narration presents the fear of aging in an unfiltered and direct manner. In his descriptions of bodily transformation, aging ceases to be an abstract concept and instead becomes an empirical reality, repeatedly confirmed through lived experience. For instance, he writes: “Your bare feet on the cold floor as you climb out of bed and walk to the window. You are sixty-four years old (Auster, p. 230).” This statement not only records a physiological condition but also, through the emphasis on details such as the “cold floor” and “bare feet,” accentuates the immediacy of sensory perception. Compared to performing the same action in childhood, the aged body appears visibly more fragile, and the simple act of standing barefoot serves as an unmistakable signifier of aging.

Elsewhere, Auster writes: “It is an incontestable fact that you are no longer young. One month from today, you will be turning sixty-four, and although that is not excessively old (p. 2).” This direct statement of age forces an unavoidable confrontation with the fact of aging. Auster avoids rhetorical devices and metaphors, instead presenting the irrevocability of aging in the starkest possible terms. His portrayal of “bodily decline” and “loss of autonomy” aligns closely with the theoretical framework of the Fourth Age (Gullette, p. 144). Further reinforcing this, he describes: “You feel the blood stop flowing in your veins, and little by little your limbs turn to cement. That is when you start to howl (Auster, p. 129).” This passage highlights not only the gradual accumulation of aging’s effects but also the sudden and catastrophic nature of physical collapse. The weakening of the body ultimately triggers psychological terror, implying a growing awareness of mortality and a gradual psychological preparation for death. By emphasizing this abrupt “breakdown,” Auster immerses the reader in an almost visceral crisis experience—an illustration of how aging anxiety is socially constructed.

In the passage recounting his mother's death, Auster's treatment of emotion is particularly distinctive. He writes: "Your mother has just died, and you've turned into a block of wood (p. 119)." Here, rather than conveying conventional grief, the narrative captures a state of "emotional freezing"—the sudden absence of feeling and the psychological numbness induced by the loss of a close family member. The death of a loved one not only signifies the severance of familial bonds but also prompts the narrator to reassess his own existence (Varvogli, p. 9). This approach stands in stark contrast to traditional portrayals of mourning, amplifying the existential shock of death. A similar theme recurs in Auster's recollection of his father: "At fifty-seven, I felt old. Now, at seventy-four, I feel much younger than I did then (Auster, p. 29)." This statement reflects a shifting perception of time and aging: the fear and uncertainty surrounding old age, once acutely felt, paradoxically fade as one actually enters later life. This phenomenon resonates with the theory of the Third Age, wherein individuals, upon retirement or later in life, frequently engage in recollection and introspection to construct new meanings for themselves. Thus, Auster does not merely depict the struggles of aging, illness, and death but also seeks solace and meaning through language, memory, and intimate relationships.

3.2 From Grief to Self-Affirmation

Although *Winter Journal* repeatedly confronts themes of aging, illness, and death, Auster does not succumb to nihilism. He writes: "You had learned that death was not something to be feared anymore (Auster, p. 32)." This statement signifies his ultimate acceptance of mortality. The transformation from fear to tranquility forms a crucial narrative logic in the text—aging is not merely a biological decline but an ongoing process of constructing meaning through memory and narration.

Through second-person self-examination, Auster vividly presents the fear of aging, the fragility of the body, and the sorrow of losing loved ones. These themes extend beyond personal memoirs, engaging in a broader existential discourse on human life. While Auster does not offer a concrete solution, his creative approach implicitly suggests a response: when one fully acknowledges the "boundary situations" of existence, one can continue to narrate, to tell one's story, and thus persist in living. It is in this seemingly fragile yet persistently defiant process of storytelling that individuals resist the pull of meaninglessness, continuously reaffirming the value and significance of their own existence.

4. Transcending Cognitive Boundaries

4.1 Second-Person Narration and Death Anxiety

In *Winter Journal*, Paul Auster's journey of self-examination revolves around the inevitability of death—his experience of panic attacks not only represents a traumatic episode in his personal psychological history but also serves as a site for exploring the nature of existence and the implications of death. Unlike conventional memoirs that attempt to impose narrative coherence on life experiences, Auster employs a second-person perspective that oscillates within the fissures of memory, blurring the boundaries between rational cognition and emotional intuition. This narrative strategy not only enhances the immersive quality of the text but also transforms the reader into a participant in a philosophical experiment on death.

Initially, Auster attempts to approach death from an almost utopian perspective, treating it as a transition of consciousness rather than the cessation of existence. He writes: “On top of all that good news, you had learned that death was not something to be feared anymore, that when the moment comes for a person to die, his being shifts into another zone of consciousness, and he is able to accept it (p. 32).” At this stage, he seeks to dissolve the fear of death through philosophical contemplation, framing it as a shift in awareness. However, when the reality of death anxiety descends upon him, this rationalized interpretation quickly collapses: “Five years later, when you had the first of your panic attacks, the sudden, monstrous attack that ripped through your body and threw you to the floor, you were not the least bit calm or accepting. You thought you were going to die then, too, but this time you howled in terror, more afraid than you had ever been in your life (p. 32).” Here, “you” is no longer a detached observer but an individual consumed by the fear of death. This dual perception of death reveals Auster’s inner conflict: on the one hand, he aspires to accept death through philosophical reasoning; on the other, when confronted with an actual existential crisis, all rational constructs prove powerless. This experience of existential collapse parallels Martin Heidegger’s concept of *sein zum tode* (“being toward death”) in *Being and Time*. Heidegger asserts: “*Angst is anxious is being in-the-world itself* (Heidegger, p. 175).” Auster’s panic attack serves as a literary manifestation of this moment, marking the individual’s sudden awareness of death and the trembling of “Da-sein” when confronting its ultimate possibility.

Auster’s frequent use of second-person narration not only enhances the reader’s immersion but also universalizes the experience of death. The “you” in the text is both a projection of Auster himself and an open invitation to any reader grappling with aging and the fear of death. Through this narrative strategy, Auster blurs the distinction between “story” and “discourse,” transforming death anxiety into a shared existential experience. This approach differs from traditional memoirs’ linear storytelling; instead, it allows the narrative subject to oscillate between introspection and externalization, making death anxiety transcend the confines of individual experience and emerge as a universal existential dilemma. Heidegger further suggests: “But if being toward death belongs primordially and essentially to the being of Da-sein, it must also be demonstrated in everydayness, although initially in an inauthentic way (p. 233).” Auster’s narrative technique embodies this possibility of “authentic” awakening by universalizing the individual’s confrontation with death, allowing readers to enter a reflective process of “sein zum tode” within the text.

4.2 Moving toward Self-Surpassing through Writing

Following his deep engagement with aging and death, Auster’s narrative gradually transitions toward a form of self-surpassing or self-redemption. The second-person perspective not only conveys anxiety and fear but also opens up space for imagining alternative modes of existence. Toward the conclusion of the text, he writes: “A door has closed. Another door has opened (Auster, p. 230).” This statement marks a cognitive shift--although death remains inevitable, writing becomes a means of resisting the erosion of time.

Auster’s approach to writing resonates with Heidegger’s discussion of *Entschlossenheit*. Heidegger argues that authentic being-toward-death is not merely an experience of fear but also a decisive

confrontation with one's own potentiality—for *Da-sein* can only truly exist-toward-death when it makes an authentic decision (Heidegger, p. 275). Auster's act of writing exemplifies this resoluteness, enabling the individual to extend the self through language when faced with mortality.

Additionally, this narrative strategy aligns with Hannah Arendt's theory of speech and action. Arendt contends that by narrating one's experiences, individuals embed their private life trajectories within public discourse, thereby transcending the limitations of personal death (Arendt, p. 173). Auster's writing is not merely a record of individual experiences but also an act of "creating existence," sustaining the self in textual space and granting personal experience a form of linguistic immortality.

Winter Journal not only examines how memory shapes personal identity but also delves deeply into the philosophical implications of death as one of humanity's ultimate existential dilemmas. In Auster's narrative of death, we observe three interwoven trajectories: 1). the transition in death consciousness—an initial attempt to rationalize death as a transformation of consciousness; 2). the complete collapse of emotional stability—when panic attacks strike, rational contemplation is shattered by the primal terror of death; 3). the transcendence through writing—by narrating, Auster seeks to "persist" within language, reinterpreting and redefining death.

In the final chapter, Auster does not offer a definitive "solution" to the problem of death; rather, his memoir-writing provides a possible response: death will arrive, but narration can continue. Writing is not merely an act of documentation but a testament to and affirmation of existence. In the realm of language, individual experiences and reflections persist beyond the confines of mortality. Ultimately, *Winter Journal* presents an open-ended proposition: when faced with the "ultimate predicament" of death, perhaps only through continuous narration and self-expression can one, in a certain sense, transcend conventional cognitive boundaries and find a momentary refuge for the soul.

5. Conclusion

In *Winter Journal*, Paul Auster extensively employs second-person narration to interweave memory, bodily perception, and the passage of time within the same textual space. This technique not only enhances the immersive quality of the reading experience but also renders the anxiety surrounding aging, illness, and death particularly vivid and tangible. Auster does not merely engage in a linear retrospection of personal experiences; rather, through the repeated inscription of urban environments and bodily states, he constructs a narrative network that intersects with social history, life stages, and philosophical reflections.

This distinctive narrative approach first demonstrates how memory becomes an integral part of the present: readers do not passively observe the author's "past story"; instead, through the second-person perspective, they are drawn into an experiential mode, where they co-experience the disorientation, aging anxieties, and existential uncertainties alongside the "I" in the text. Second, Auster persistently engages with "boundary situations" in the narrative, directly confronting the inescapable limits of human existence—not only the deterioration of the body but also the emotional upheaval caused by the loss of

loved ones. In this process, individual identity ceases to be fixed; rather, it is continuously redefined and deconstructed through the flux of time and space. Through such introspective analysis, Auster transforms what initially appears to be an intimate account of the body and emotions into a philosophical inquiry of universal significance.

More importantly, *Winter Journal* does not merely engage with death as an abstract philosophical concept, nor does it succumb entirely to fear. Instead, Auster seeks a form of self-transcendence through language, navigating between pain and mourning. He initially attempts to rationalize death, viewing it from a utopian perspective as a “transition of consciousness,” yet ultimately acknowledges that in the moment of confronting true fear, all theoretical constructs may collapse. However, it is precisely this existential struggle that compels him to persistently ask through writing: in the face of an inevitable end, is there a way to achieve continuation? Within the invocation of second-person narration, both the reader and the author are drawn into this existential dilemma, while simultaneously, the narrative process itself hints at a possible spiritual or meaningful resolution.

In other words, Auster’s work is not merely a personal memoir but a literary and philosophical experiment on “how to understand self-existence.” He intricately entangles individual experience with social and cultural history, interweaving historical memory with present perception, transforming aging, illness, and death into gateways for self-reflection and the exploration of shared human dilemmas. At the textual level, the repetition and variation of second-person narration serve not only as an artistic technique for reader immersion but also as an attempt to challenge the conventional paradigm of memoir writing: the individual does not merely recount the past to oneself but also pulls the reader into the experience, compelling them to confront the fear of aging and death, the pain of familial loss, and the fundamental question of existence. Writing here functions not only as a means of documenting the past but also as an act of resisting nihilism and the erosion of time.

From this perspective, Auster’s exploration in *Winter Journal* becomes clearer: how does one confront the finitude of life through the retrospection and reconstruction of memory, and how does narration serve as a means of self-continuation? Auster ultimately does not provide a definitive answer, but his writing practice suggests that the value of memoir lies not only in chronicling personal experiences but also in continuously interrogating the relationship between the self and the world. Perhaps, by engaging with storytelling through the second-person perspective, we may slightly transcend the established cognitive boundaries, transforming “death” from a purely terrifying prospect into a shared human concern. It is precisely through this dialogue and reflection that individuals, even in the face of time’s inexorable force, may still retain a glimmer of vitality and courage.

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