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Neurological Impairment and Literary Empowerment in Nicole Krauss's *Man Walks into a Room*

Pascale Antolin

- 1 The title of Nicole Krauss's first novel (2002), *Man Walks into a Room*, is strangely reminiscent both of "a man walks into a bar" jokes and of the famous riddle "you walk into a room and see a bed..."—as if Krauss were piquing her readers' curiosity before they have even opened the book. In fact, the novel could also have been called "man walks into a new life": Samson Greene, a 36-year-old professor at Columbia university, experiences amnesia after undergoing surgery for the removal of a benign brain tumor. When he wakes up in the hospital in the early pages of the narrative, he has forgotten everything about his life from the age of 12.

- 2 In his introduction to *The Vintage Book of Amnesia* (2000), Jonathan Lethem underlines that "real, diagnosable amnesia—people getting knocked on the head and forgetting their names—is mostly just a rumor in the world. It is a rare condition, and usually a brief one. In books and movies, though, versions of amnesia lurk everywhere.... Amnesiacs might not much exist, but amnesiac characters stumble everywhere" in cinema and literature (xiii)—including the works of great European writers like Kafka and Beckett. In a 2003 essay on "Postmodern Amnesia," Timothy Melley considers amnesia a typically contemporary American phenomenon. "Amnesia is everywhere in contemporary American culture," he writes. "A major press has recently published an 'amnesia anthology' (Lethem). And an increasingly familiar array of traumatic amnesia—the results of everything from brain injury and brainwashing to multiple-personality disorder...—have become cultural obsessions." Yet Melley reaches the same conclusion as Lethem: "Amnesia has become an increasingly attractive narrative device" (106, 107). For Melley, however, amnesia is a trope,

one of the several important tropes through which "postmodern" theories of history and subjectivity are tested in the cultural arena. If amnesia has registered anxiety about the stability of the liberal self, it has also become a metaphor for historiographical dilemmas—for the sense that it is no longer possible to ground

historical narratives securely and that the failure to do so has led to dangerous forms of collective forgetting. (107)

- 3 More recently, in *Memory in the Twenty-First Century* (2016), Sebastian Groes and Nick Lavery point out that the “waning of postmodernism” has led to “a shift away from a discussion of memory as cultural and collective towards an obsession with individual, biological forgetting” (239).
- 4 Krauss’s novel is certainly “populated with a robust cast of human beings” (Burn, “Neuronovel” 165), and from this viewpoint she departs from the conventions of postmodernist fiction. Staging a character with a neurological condition, she sets her narrative in the contemporary genre—some would rather say sub-genre—of the “neuronovel” (Roth), “neuronarrative” (Johnson) or “syndrome novel” (Lustig and Peacock), that is, narratives drawing on neuroscience and neurological syndromes to explore the complex relations between body, mind, self and world. Emphasizing the brain and brain-related issues allows neuronovelists to participate in what has been called “neuromania,” a disparaging term to describe fields such as neuro-economics, neuro-education, etc. that tend to magnify recent developments in neuroscience. According to Jason Tougaw, most neuronovelists “use narrative to ask a set of questions the laboratory sciences are not equipped to answer: *What role does the brain play in the making of identity, the experience of embodiment and the shaping of social relations?*” (*Elusive Brain* 11). As a neuronovel staging an amnesiac, *Man Walks into a Room* is specifically concerned with the relation between memory and identity since “memory is crucially related to human identity, selfhood and self-knowledge” (Nalbantian 5). In other words, what happens to somebody’s identity when they lose their memory?
- 5 The question was also tackled by Oliver Sacks in two of his case histories: “The Lost Mariner” (1984) and “The Abyss” (2007). Sacks opens “The Lost Mariner” with an epigraph from *My Last Sigh: The Autobiography of Luis Buñuel* (1983): “You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realize that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all.... Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it we are nothing” (4). However, Sacks actually debunks Buñuel’s equation of memory with identity as he describes Jimmie G., one of his patients suffering from retrograde amnesia¹ as a consequence of Korsakov’s Syndrome.² In “The Abyss,” about musician Cleave Wearing, whose amnesia results from a brain infection, Sacks distinguishes between Wearing’s “semantic memory” and “episodic memory.”³ While Wearing cannot remember he ever was a musician, he can still express himself through music—listening, playing and discussing it. In other words, his semantic memory outlives his episodic memory. “In both cases, Sacks undoes the memory-identity equation in order to explore memory and identity as distributed and entangled phenomena” (Tougaw, “Amnesia” 281). Undoing the memory-identity equation is also what Krauss does in *Man Walks into a Room*. She suggests “a doctrine of contemporary memory research: the fact that memory is not a single phenomenon; its physiology is distributed and its phenomenology variable. Of course, the same is true of selfhood. If neither memory nor identity is singular, it makes little sense to equate them,” as Tougaw writes⁴ (“Amnesia” 282). In other words, memory may be crucial but it is not all there is to identity—as Samson confirms in a passage where he is used as focal character: “he’d lost everything but. His memory, his wife, his job, his friends, twenty-four years of his life—but not his mind” (MWR⁵ 174). In 2013, Krauss clarified the theme of the novel as follows: “That novel, about an amnesiac, began as a way to experiment with escape from the claustrophobia of

memory and the self. Untethered, Samson finds himself in a position of radical solitude, struggling to assemble a new sense of coherence" (Treisman).

- 6 While Krauss draws on contemporary neuroscience—her novel was published two years after the end of the “Decade of the brain” proclaimed by President George Bush in July 1990—she also writes against it. No matter what Marco Roth may say in his famous 2009 essay, “The Rise of the Neuronovel,” she challenges the reductionist approach developed in 1990s bestsellers—including *Consciousness Explained* (1991) by philosopher Daniel Dennett, and *How the Mind Works* (1997) by psychologist Steven Pinker. They propound neural theories of mind and explain mental phenomena in terms of brain processes—replacing personhood by “brainhood” (Vidal 11). In contrast, Krauss’ “return to a largely conventional narrative form is connected to a wider argument the novel makes about literature’s reaction against neuroscience’s growing cultural authority” (Burn, “Mapping” 44). Krauss’s neuronovel, therefore, emphasizes the power of literature, and the power of narrative in particular, over neuroscientific, often reductionist, discourse. But Krauss is not simply engaged in the two-culture debate all over again. She also explores philosopher Thomas Nagel’s argument that the limits of neuroscience’s explanatory power lie in its inability to express subjective experience—in other words, “what it is like to be a bat.” In “Cognitive Investigations: The Problem of Qualia and Style in the Contemporary Neuronovel” (2012), Andrew Gaedtke explains: “while significant progress has been made in mapping particular cognitive operations within the architecture of the brain, the movement from objective, neural networks to the subjective experience of consciousness remains a persistent problem for cognitive science, one that has been taken up repeatedly by writers such as McEwan, Lodge, Richard Powers and others”—all authors of neurofiction. And a couple of lines further down, Gaedtke adds: “[these writers] adapt the discourses and debates that have structured cognitive science for the last several decades while demonstrating their implications for the form of the contemporary novel” (185). It is mostly through the manipulation of genres that Krauss shows an interest in the formal aspects of the novel. Not only does she borrow from conventional genres, particularly the coming of age narrative, but she also revises their conventions and combines them with other genres—science fiction, the horror novel, the Katabasis and quest narratives, which she revamps as well. Most of all, she is concerned with subjectivity and consciousness. Her narrative is thus packed with highly subjective descriptions, sensory impressions and idiosyncratic images emphasizing both the singularity of experience and the power of storytelling to account for it—to such an extent that the novel has been considered “a counternarrative to the abstraction of species-level theorizing” (Burn, “Mapping” 45). I will focus on neuroscience and its language in order to show how Krauss’s neuronovel challenges neuroscience and its reductionist discourse. Then I will turn to Krauss’s particular way of combining and distorting genres, and conclude with her use of the language of consciousness and subjective experience.

1. From Neuroscience to Science Fiction

- 7 The language of neuroscience is mostly introduced by two neurologists and a neurosurgeon—all characterized negatively. The first neurologist, “a doctor Tanner” (MWR 13), appears early in the first chapter when Anna, Samson’s wife, arrives in Nevada from New York after Samson has been missing for eight days. His diagnosis is

first filtered by Anna, a focal character in the passage: “Samson had been diagnosed with a tumor that, all those months lost in work or sleep, had been *applying its arbitrary, pernicious pressure* on his brain” (MWR 13, my emphasis). While Samson is mentioned in the passive form, the tumor is personified, and demonized by contrast, as suggested by the polysyllabic words and sound effects. The neurologist is hardly described but his words stand out in italics: “*It’s about the size of a cherry, pressing on the temporal lobe of his brain, most likely a juvenile pilocytic astrocytoma*” (MWR 13). The italics suggest that the sentence hardly makes sense to Anna. She cannot appropriate the doctor’s words—hence the use of direct speech—despite the vernacular image. She can only imagine “the shiny dark red of a cherry nestled into the gray matter of the brain” (MWR 13). Stephen Burn explains that “Krauss’s work marks the disconnection between language and a specialized neuroscience: the doctor’s comparison is drained of metaphoricity and the analogy rests statically in its initial state as a literal cherry on the brain” (Burn, “Mapping” 44). By contrast, metaphoricity is fully restored on the next page when the narrator describes Samson’s brain on a CT scan: “Dr. Tanner turned the CT scan around and slid it across the desk to her, leaning forward in his chair to trace the atlas of Samson’s brain with the cap of his pen. It came to rest on *a yellow island in a continent of blue*” (MWR 14, my emphasis). While the neurologist with his pen seems to be—or means to appear—in control, the running metaphor ironically suggests how little neuroscientists actually know about the brain: a mere “yellow island” in a mostly unmapped “continent of blue.” The neurologist’s attitude is also questioned a couple of lines further down: “his voice filled with the compassion that is sometimes confused with pity.... He paused, a deep medical pause, his fingers resting lightly on Samson’s brain” (MWR 14). While his superior, self-confident attitude is confirmed by his gesture, his voice betrays ambiguity, role-playing (“medical pause”) and, especially, a lack of empathy.

- 8 The second neurologist, too, is introduced negatively, and turns out to have an uncertain identity as well. When, after a week or two, the doctors who first examined Samson in New York no longer “marveled at,” in fact, “seemed to lose interest” in his case, he “was given over to the care of a neurologist called Dr. Lavell” (MWR 31). Somewhat ironically, Samson and Dr. Lavell are equally disparaged by the first doctors’ attitudes. Samson is dehumanized—he is merely a case that can easily change hands. As for Dr. Lavell, he seems to be a second-rate neurologist accepting patients that others are no longer interested in—as confirmed by the remote location of his office: “in an almost forgotten hallway of the Neurology Institute terminating in the dead end of a broom closet” (MWR 40).⁶ The portrait of Dr. Lavell that emerges from Samson’s different appointments is hardly consistent, maybe because it is based on a combination of facts (the office location), Samson’s personal observation (MWR 31), and rumors (“Samson had been told”; MWR 32). Hence, the neurologist’s identity appears just as hard to grasp as Samson’s. However, during their first meeting, Lavell confesses his ignorance or, more specifically, his inability to solve what philosopher David Chalmers calls “the hard problem of consciousness” (6), that is, subjectivity. When Samson asks, “what if you could make out exactly what was going on in someone’s mind just by watching those spikes?” the doctor replies, “The thoughts themselves? Now *that* would be something” (MWR 31). Here, Lavell admits to the “explanatory gap,” to take up philosopher Joseph Levine’s term, between objective neural networks and the third-person of scientific descriptions, and subjective experience as it is expressed in the first-person singular. It is also the gap between the brain—especially as it is

represented on a screen or CT scan—and the mind, or consciousness as it is experienced by humans. While Samson uses the word “mind” again during his next meeting with the neurologist (MWR 41), by contrast, Lavell refers to the “brain” (MWR 71), thus proving that he is “more loyal to the organ of the brain than the personality it produce[s]” (MWR 32)—and shows as little empathy with Samson as his colleague.

- 9 However, the first two neurologists only play minor roles in the first chapter of the novel. The most prominent scientific figure is a neurosurgeon, Dr. Ray Malcolm, who plays a major part both throughout the second chapter (MWR 79-159) and in Samson’s rebuilding process. Unlike his predecessors, Dr. Malcolm is no longer a practicing doctor—“trained as a neurosurgeon, but now I only do research, neuroscience” (MWR 84)—and Samson is not his patient but a potential guinea pig that he is trying to convince to take part in his experiment:

The reason why I became a scientist—I was a doctor, remember, but from the beginning I was moving toward pure science—was because I wanted to ease the yearning. My own to begin with, but it was clear to me I wasn’t the only one. People—physicists, whatever—will tell you we’re all tuned into the universe, to something greater than ourselves. What I say is, why can’t we try to share, at the deepest possible level, that distant connection? What I’m saying is, *why can’t we get inside each other’s heads?* From time to time, to get out of ourselves and into someone else. Simple idea, but the ramifications are extraordinary. The possibility for true empathy—imagine how it would affect human relations. (MWR 105-106)

- 10 Malcolm’s brain manipulations—literally to get inside somebody else’s head—and grandiloquent speech suggest a mad scientist turned mock preacher on a bogus mission. Unlike the first two neurologists, he claims to be concerned with the question of (“true”) empathy, but it turns out to be untrue—as proved by his attitude after the brain experiment (MWR 165). In neurofiction characters often recast “their own subjective experiences as objective neurological processes through the discourses of cognitive science” (Gaedtke 189), but Dr. Malcolm does not use the language of neuroscience in the passage—and hardly ever uses it in the novel. Instead, he relies on the first-person narrative—“I,” “my” and “me” are used seven times in the first three lines. The first-person plural that follows and the concluding third-person (“human relations”) betray his effort to escape the first-person singular perspective and turn to pluralized and more universalized narrative forms. “This attempted movement between first- and third-person perspectives,” Gaedtke writes, “is a distinguishing stylistic feature of the neuronovel that invokes the ‘hard problem’ of qualia” (189), that is, the subjective, first-person of perception and feelings that was theorized by Levine in 1983. Dr. Malcolm’s speech, therefore, epitomizes the major issues and debates at the heart of neuroscience.⁸ Besides, in a certain number of neuronovels, “the interdisciplinary epistemology tends to flow in one direction: the humanists must learn what the scientists already know, or are in the process of learning. The scientists, on the other hand, are generally skeptical that the humanities have any real knowledge that can benefit them” (Johnson 181). But Krauss stages a scientist using argumentative mechanisms and discursive strategies borrowed from the humanities. His major talent is that of a humanist: he can manipulate language—rather than brains—hence the recurrent gap between his words and his deeds, a sort of ironic echo of the explanatory gap he has been trying to bridge. This gap is also a gap between signifier and signified, as confirmed both by the comparison of Malcolm with “a great performer” (MWR 105) and by the names of the different buildings in the desert compound: the lab being a former spa, the buildings are “still referred to by their original names—the Bathhouse,

the Sauna—like sinister euphemisms”⁹ (MWR 114). Unlike scientific discourse, Malcolm’s speech is highly unstable: it can be either colloquial¹⁰ or symbolic,¹¹ depending on the circumstances. But it is never scientific and objective, let alone reliable.

- 11 Through the character, Krauss is drawing a caricature of neuroscientists’ wildest ambitions, and the gloomy results these may provoke.¹² Malcolm, the smooth talker, also allows Krauss to emphasize the power of language and narrative to create illusion and fiction. While the episode starts as a scientific experiment to bridge the explanatory gap, it turns into science fiction in Malcolm’s speeches, that is, literally, fiction about science. The chapter indeed could come straight from a science fiction novel: brain manipulation has been a major theme in science fiction since the 1960s,¹³ and Krauss also uses several strategies of defamiliarization such as the lab in the desert (MWR 115), the dehumanization of the volunteers called “Inputs” (MWR 116), and the scientific vocabulary used by the narrator to describe Malcolm’s futuristic experiments and his equipment (MWR 116, 121). In other words, Kraus’s story crosses the border between referential fiction and science fiction, and turns the neuroscientist into a con artist. However, Gaedtke warns,

It may be tempting to interpret the emergence of this genre [the neuronovel] as a reaction to a perceived encroachment of the sciences into what has been the traditional domain of literature [that is, consciousness]. In this interpretation, the neuronovel would present simply another chapter in the story of the two-cultures antinomy. However, [many] works... demonstrate a legible fascination with the methods, discourses, and conceptual impasses of recent cognitive science. (196)

- 12 Krauss certainly shows a fascination with consciousness and the explanatory gap. Malcolm’s words (MWR 126) strangely echo Lavell’s: “Empathy is the capacity to participate in, or vicariously experience, another’s feelings” (MWR 42). The sentence is repeated in more or less similar terms throughout the narrative (MWR 126, 208, 236) and thus creates a chain of implicit references both to Nagel’s famous 1974 essay, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” and to the problem of qualia. Dr. Malcolm’s project aims at nothing less than “experiencing one another’s consciousness” through “sharing a memory” (MWR 105). His failure stands for the failure of neuroscience to account for consciousness and the mind, and it brings Samson, and the reader with him, back to the explanatory gap (MWR 208).
- 13 A number of critics have been all the more puzzled by the episode since the neurologists’ and neuroscientist’s trails are left unresolved, and this is no doubt one of the novel’s weaknesses. In *The New York Times*, Meredith Blum writes, for example: “Samson, expecting, perhaps, to be granted a new life, is horrified to be implanted with a veteran’s recollection of a 1957 A-bomb test in Nevada. Having introduced this straight-out-of-Philip-K.-Dick plot twist, Krauss leaves it unresolved, and fails to unite the myriad thematic strands involving memory and solitude, including many heavy-handed biblical allusions (not least the protagonist’s name), into a coherent whole” (Blum).
- 14 While Krauss warns against neuroscience and shows the limits of its language, she also borrows from traditional literary genres—including science fiction and the coming of age novel—thus betraying a concern with the form of fiction-writing. Neuronovelists often use conventional generic patterns, but they tend to privilege detective fiction (Tougaw, *Elusive Brain* 132-135), even though they revise its conventions to serve their own purposes: John Wray’s *Lowboy* (2009) and Jonathan Lethem’s *Motherless Brooklyn*

(1999), among others, are good examples. Teasing her readers, Krauss initially pretends her novel is a detective story, too, as suggested by the incipit of her first chapter: “When they found him he was halfway down the only stretch of asphalt that cuts through Mercury Valley. The two police officers saw him up the road, ragged as a crow” (MWR 11). The opening cataphora immediately creates a sense of mystery, which is compounded by the allusion to the police officers. But this is merely a red herring: the detective story comes to an end on the next page, when Samson’s identity is confirmed. In fact, the specificity of Krauss’s novel lies in using, revising and combining major genres. Some are employed throughout the narrative, like the coming of age pattern, others only refer to one specific episode—but all are equally distorted.

2. Generic Experimentations

- 15 Unlike most amnesiacs, Samson does not try to recover his lost memory: “His memory had abandoned him, and though he had searched within himself all these weeks, he could find no desire to have it returned. If it came back now, he felt he would turn it away, and the knowledge of his renouncement, a small act of defiance, gave him a feeling of liberty” (MWR 50). Instead, he transforms his amnesia into a means of liberation from the burden of the past: “the thrill of *giving up* more... to *give up* and *give up* until there was nothing left at all” (MWR 111, my emphasis). Hence, he does not start a quest for his old life, but runs away from it. This is the beginning of a journey—which actually started earlier when he “wandered the city” of New York (MWR 48)—and, thereby, of a strange process of coming of age or, more specifically, identity (re)building.
- 16 The coming-of-age narrative¹⁴ often concerns a young hero’s journey leading to chance meetings with adults who are supposed to teach him or her lessons about life. In the end, the journey brings about a process of moral development leading the young hero from innocence to experience. Krauss follows the major convention, i.e., the journey, as Samson finds himself heading west soon after leaving his wife—a return to the beginning since he was born in California and a symbolic place, especially as far as the construction of the American nation’s identity is concerned.¹⁵ As Kenneth Millard explains in *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction* (2007), “moving forward is a means of attaining a position from which the beginning can be fully understood and articulated” (16).
- 17 However, Krauss also departs from the traditional genre: first, her protagonist is not an adolescent, but a 36-year old man instead, even though he has forgotten everything about his life after the age of 12 and finds himself in the position of an adolescent looking for his identity. Next, the people Samson meets and who are supposed to teach him lessons, ironically, are mostly young people, younger than he is at least—except for Donald in the desert compound. Most of them also share common characteristics: they do not belong to his past—except for Lana Porter, his former student, who stands for a sort of transition “between [his] two lives” (MWR 158)—like him they have been uprooted at one point or another in their short lives, and have taken on a new identity. They are doubles of a sort that Samson can identify with, as well as “teachers” or “guides” that he can learn from.
- 18 In a significant reversal of roles, for instance, Lana becomes the first person he can openly talk to, and her move to California may have influenced Samson to go there, too.

Her identity change takes place two years earlier when she goes to college and moves from Cleveland to New York, and it is symbolized by the cutting of her long hair: “With the new haircut people looked at her differently, which she was glad for because she couldn’t anymore be the same person she had been all along; she had to *give something up* to make room for all of it, for the dumb, ecstatic city” (MWR 56, emphasis added). Significantly, she uses the same words as Samson and experiences a similar process—albeit deliberately. As he visits her in Los Angeles later, he comes across her boyfriend, Wingate, alias Winn, a computer specialist, hence his nickname after a computer server, suggesting that he, too, has changed his identity. Winn experiences uprooting when he goes to college (MWR 94-95). Though a secondary character, Winn is clear-sighted enough to warn Samson against Dr. Malcolm (MWR 99) and, therefore, plays his role as teacher—but Samson has been so “indoctrinated,” as he later admits (MR 194), by Dr. Malcolm’s sweet talk that he does not listen.

- 19 The third major character Samson meets is Donald, and he is more consistent with the genre because he is older, and even offers to be a substitute father: “So what would you say to my adopting you, Sammy?”.... ‘Shut up and come to Papa’” (146-147). While “coming of age... is a drama of coming to terms with the father” (Millard 15), Samson does not seem to take Donald seriously or care much about his absent father. Krauss departs from the conventions of the genre again, all the more since Donald is a grotesque figure, as suggested by his appearance (for instance, MWR 113)¹⁶ and his constant concern with sex: “You’re like a kid, Sammy. Somebody’s gotta teach you a thing or two. If we get outta here alive, first thing is I’m getting you a whore.... If you were my own kid—which technically you are because I said so—I’d be embarrassed” (MWR 150). Here, however, Donald underlines the performative power of (his) language—unlike Dr. Malcolm’s in particular. For instance, after one of Donald’s traumatic memories has been implanted in Samson’s brain, the experiment does not bring them closer, nor does it create “empathy” between them—either “emotional empathy” or “cognitive empathy”¹⁷ (Bloom 16). On the contrary, it tears them apart: Donald does not answer his phone when Samson calls him for help (MWR 164), let alone understands him (MWR 192). What Donald shows Samson, or helps him to realize, is how lonely Samson may be: “How can a mind know how alone it is until it brushes up against some other mind? A single mark had been made, another person’s memory imposed onto his mind, and now the magnitude of his own loss was impossible for Samson to ignore” (MWR 193). The addition of a foreign memory paradoxically sheds light on Samson’s loss (MWR 174), and brings him the “awareness of losing” (MWR 16)¹⁸ that he needs to move forward in his rebuilding process.
- 20 Before his last phone conversation with Donald, however, Samson comes across a fifteen or sixteen-year-old adolescent (MWR 174), ironically named Luke,¹⁹ and they spend a night together on a drinking spree in Las Vegas. Here again Krauss departs from the conventions of the genre since, right from the beginning, the characters’ roles are uncertain: “Samson would have liked to lend him advice and wisdom. To be, for a while, the older brother he himself never had” (MWR 177). Though merely an adolescent, Luke is grotesquely dressed in a “suit” and “fedora” (MWR 175) like a grown-up man. He disappears during the critical episode in the pathology lab (MWR 184) and Samson finds himself alone. The whole night represents a sort of paroxysmal moment because of the influence of alcohol, and Luke’s suggestion that Samson “*get the tumor back*” (MWR 181). While the short sentence hardly makes sense at first sight—as

suggested by the use of italics—it takes on unexpected meaning for the intoxicated Samson: getting back what he lost.

- 21 This is the beginning of a quest “to claim the tumor, *his* tumor, from its clinical storage in the hospital” (MWR 181), and also of a “nightmar[ish]” journey (MWR 184). In fact, the narrator depicts several increasingly ghastly episodes (in the ER, in the lab), as so many stages of a descent into hell—although the lab is on the seventh floor of the building. The description of the lab might have come straight out of a horror story: not only does it call to mind “the well-organized scene of a horrendous and bloody accident,” but the young nurse at the entrance is so “pale-faced” that she “could use a transfusion herself.” In this place, humans are reduced to bits and traces of flesh —“brownish stains... human clots, bits of flesh, fatty and bloody bits” (MWR 185). They are also depersonalized, as suggested by the reference under Samson’s name on the computer screen: “Lot number 66589037. Juvenile pilocytic astrocytoma. Left temporal lobe” (MWR 187). Language itself is under threat, as evidenced by the syntactic sentences: the narrator’s description is a mere enumeration and the reference consists of three verbless, almost meaningless sentences with digits in one of them, instead of words. The pathology lab is the incarnation of meaninglessness and human destruction.
- 22 Yet, Samson reverses the process a couple of lines further down when he is used as focal character to describe his slides: “Each had three identical half-moons with a small dot beneath. Eighteen shavings stained fuchsia, one cell thick, of the lump with which all of this began, removed a year ago from his brain.” With the introduction of metaphors, color, and time—that is, Samson’s personal history—horror is held at bay, and meaning restored together with his humanity. Here, Krauss shows that language and narrative—unlike scientific discourse—can create meaning, as confirmed by the comparison that follows: “He might as well have captured the Rosetta stone” (MWR 187). The episode turns out to be a rewriting of the myth of Katabasis, with a pathology lab as a modern version of hell. And like Joseph Campbell’s “adventurer” in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), Samson returns with “his life-transmuting trophy” (179), i.e., a series of six slides representing his brain. They will not contribute to the “renewing of the community,” as in the traditional myth (Campbell 179), but allow Samson instead to “return to himself” (MWR 194), as confirmed by his decision to go back to California.
- 23 On the bus to Santa Cruz, Samson meets the next “teacher” in his journey, a girl named Patricia and nicknamed Pip, who has also experienced significant uprooting when she moved to India (MWR 201), and is now about to experience another since she is on her way to a mass baptism in the Pacific. At the end of the bus trip, she recovers her name, Patricia²⁰ (MWR 210), and Samson’s meeting with her takes on highly symbolic importance. While Lana helped him to leave his wife, Pip somehow brings him back to Anna—initially at least, she reminds him of Anna: “a young vision of his wife” (MWR 197)—and to his origin. As Pip quotes from the Bible, she also reminds him of his identity—he is named after a Biblical hero (MWR 203)—and turns him into a “pilgrim” like her (MWR 198, 214), on a quest for his homeland. As for the baptism she is heading for, it suggests a symbolic death and resurrection that also concerns Samson. Pip, therefore, paves the way for the last stage in his journey: finding his mother’s grave and getting back to himself. The whole passage and the Bible that Pip gives him when they part may represent “a partial return to religion and spirituality”²¹ (Burn,

“Mapping” 45-46) in an attempt to resist “biology and strict materialism” (Ferris 304)²²—even though Krauss never speaks of the soul, unlike Joshua Ferris in *The Unnamed* (2010) and Jonathan Franzen in “My Father’s Brain” (2002), for instance. She sticks to the mind, thus proving that she is more concerned with consciousness than with spirituality.

- 24 With the last teacher in his journey, his great-uncle Max, not only does Samson get back to his family but he finds himself with another double, the old man suffering from amnesia provoked by Alzheimer’s.²³ Once again, Krauss manipulates the genre, the last episode in which Samson finds his mother’s grave being highly grotesque—as the description of Max in his pajamas and wheelchair suggests. Max is compared to a “parachuter,” “a retired boxer” and then to “a child in a snowstorm” (MWR 234-235). The thirty-six-year-old amnesiac has returned to a womb that is actually a tomb, yet he has managed to be somehow reborn.
- 25 Throughout the novel, Krauss relies on the journey as the basis of the coming-of-age narrative and it is the most consistent pattern in the novel: “this structure of movement, of the journey is paradoxically a means of getting back to the beginning” (Millard 16). While the novel is highly fragmented with a prologue and epilogue, and four different chapters in-between, each divided into numerous longer and shorter sections,²⁴ the westward journey gives the narrative unity. However, the novel is not a traditional coming-of-age story—the hero being an adult and an amnesiac—and Samson does not evolve from innocence to experience. Instead, he starts from ignorance and solitude, and through chance meetings, trial and error, gradually develops a relatively coherent sense of self. The major specificity of the novel, however, lies in Krauss’s ability to combine this basic pattern with other genres. The narrative thus consists in a series of episodes, each associated with one particular genre: science fiction, the horror story, the Katabasis narrative and the quest. But Krauss does not merely borrow from them, she also powerfully revises them, each in her own way, thus betraying her interest in formal exploration as well.
- 26 By contrast, her narrative strategy appears to be traditional: an omniscient third-person narrator and a predominant use of internal focalization, with Samson as major focal character—except for the prologue in the first-person plural, and the epilogue in the first-person singular. This strategy allows Krauss to yoke the third-person narrative with the first-person perspective so as to show Samson both from outside and inside, to combine his voice and the narrator’s, and especially to give the reader full access to Samson’s consciousness. According to Gaedtke, the development of neuroscience and of the reductionist approach has made it “imperative for novelists to return to the representation of psychic interiority in order to determine how, under this new regime of brain science, consciousness has been reconstructed.” At the heart of the problem, Gaedtke adds, is the question of “qualia: the (first-person) feelings of phenomenal experience and the question of their integration within a (third-person) materialist, neuroscientific account of the mind” (185). The narrative strategy chosen by Krauss allows her to combine the two viewpoints. Thus, she underlines the power of literature—contrary to neuroscience—to reconcile the first and the third-person perspectives, and, thereby, to give the reader full access both to Samson’s consciousness and the evolution of his sense of identity.

3. The Language of Subjective Experience

- 27 In *Consciousness and the Novel* (2002), David Lodge explains that “science tries to formulate general explanatory laws which apply universally.... Works of literature describe in the guise of fiction the dense specificity of personal experience, which is always unique, because each of us has a slightly or very different personal history, modifying every new experience we have; and the creation of literary texts recapitulates this uniqueness” (10-11). Krauss’ recurrent, albeit implicit, allusions to Nagel’s famous essay and, above all, the failure of Dr. Malcolm’s brain experiments betray her concern about the singularity of subjective experience, and the “uniqueness” that Lodge mentions. This concern, however, is not merely a major theme in the book, but it is also at the heart of her narrative and stylistic strategies. While earlier stream-of-consciousness novels “‘simply’ represent human thought... aspire to mimesis, the realistic depiction of an individual’s consciousness” (Johnson 170), Krauss goes a step further. “Samson’s amnesiac confusion,” for instance, allows her “to generate entire paragraphs that luxuriate over small moments of ordinary, tactile existence” (Burn, “Mapping” 44). As an illustration, Burn quotes the very beginning of section four in chapter two, when Samson is having a bath:

He lowered himself an inch at a time into scalding water... the water a hot itch, a small punishment to clear the way for comfort.... Silver bubbles like mercury formed on his skin, the skin taking on a green hue under the water, making it look rubbery and inhuman.... His whole body in, he squeezed his eyes shut and slipped his head under, and in the hot, muffled silence he could hear his waterlogged pulse.
(MWR 127)

- 28 “Such moments in Krauss,” Burn adds, “are charged not with narrative significance, but with a purer desire to render anew the cluster of experiential details that add up to the basic feeling of living close to our skins” (Burn, “Mapping” 44). Krauss is certainly drawing attention to Samson’s qualia and the pure pleasure of ordinary existence—and Burn contends that the excerpt is not charged “with narrative significance.” However, the passage stands in sharp contrast with the concluding lines of the previous section: “Despite everything Ray had said, he felt the doctor understood him, and that he in turn had witnessed something like another man’s mind laid bare” (MWR 126). It is as if the minute description of Samson’s bath was also meant to highlight his mistake about witnessing Ray Malcolm’s mind, thus providing evidence that subjective experience cannot be shared—hence the “sensitive rendering of detail [and] heightened attention to ordinary moments,” like having a bath (Burn, “Mapping” 44). The bath passage creates a pause in the narrative, forcing the reader to focus both on Samson’s subjectivity and on the strategy implemented by Krauss to express it, that is, figuration. The passage consists of a succession of images, both metaphors and similes, that is, “one of the primary means,” Lodge explains, “by which literature renders qualia” (13).
- 29 For David Punter, “metaphor begins when we find that experiences, however important or trivial, in truth do not have a name in any simple sense; according to this view, metaphor would be a continual trying to find names for things which in fact do not have names” (75).²⁵ Lodge also refers to this absence of name, although he calls it “referential description” and explains that “by describing each quale in terms of something else that is both similar and different... the object and the experience of it are vividly simulated. One sensation is invoked to give specificity to another. The nonverbal is verbalized” (13).²⁶ No wonder that Krauss’s narrative is packed with

metaphors and similes. They do not serve simply to decorate or to assert her talent. She needs them to represent Samson's consciousness.

- 30 Krauss has been criticized for this extensive use of images: "nearly every page contains a strained simile on the order of 'the dog crouched between them like a small country' or 'Samson took out the Jack Daniel's that he'd been clutching to his chest like a wounded baby rabbit'" (Blum). Some images, like those quoted by Blum, may indeed seem strained at first sight. But, first, they allow the reader to experience "Samson's amnesiac confusion" (Burn, "Mapping" 44), and the defamiliarization that either amnesia alone (e.g. the dog) or amnesia coupled with alcohol-use (e.g. the Jack Daniel's) may provoke. Next, these images are self-conscious, and represent as many signs of Samson's subjective experience as well as Krauss's interest in the problems of representation. In other words, her extensive use of images and her so-called artificiality do not reveal Krauss's weakness as a writer, but signal, even stress, her purpose.
- 31 In fact, Krauss also uses far more common, or less incongruous, images throughout her narrative. For instance, when Samson goes back to his old life with Anna, he has the sense that he is stepping into somebody else's shoes (MWR 21)—here the vernacular metaphor allows the reader to identify with Samson and grasp the strangeness he experiences all the better. While they "express the subjective flavor of an individual's existence," therefore, all the images used by Krauss ultimately suggest the ability of literature and the "inability" (Burn, "Mapping" 44) of neuroscience, by contrast, to represent consciousness. It is the power of analogy, which she can use as a humanist and a writer, that Krauss exposes throughout her narrative.
- 32 "While such power is deemed to lie beyond neuroscience's current horizons," Burn adds, "Krauss' self-conscious references to the act of storytelling dramatize her claim that literature already acts as a sophisticated container of subjective consciousness" ("Mapping" 44). Most of the characters Samson happens to meet on his journey tell him their stories. However, storytelling is particularly dramatized when Pip recalls an earlier experience to Samson, and he adds details of his own: "Pip described how after the meeting she'd driven back on the dark roads. As she talked Samson fanatically imagined the scenes, adding details of his own, like her headlights sweeping across the trees" (MWR 205). The allusion to "the dark roads" ironically fires Samson's imagination, and he sheds light—his own light—on the roads and experience evoked by Pip.
- 33 As for the idea that literature, and particularly the novel, is a "container of subjective consciousness," to quote Burn again, this is clarified by Lodge (30). The idea is particularly illustrated at the end of Krauss' novel, when Samson sees his uncle's books and mentions not his mind this time but his brain: "it did not seem impossible to Samson... that somehow everything in Max's brain had been meticulously copied down there in tiny print" (MWR 224). By contrast, Samson's lack of interest in his own books, when he gets back home at the beginning of the novel (MWR 19-20), betrays his evolution—no wonder that at the very end Samson should be "working in a library" (MWR 242). In Krauss' narrative, therefore, even the most casual allusions and concise details seem to serve a single purpose: to expose the singularity of her character's experience as only narrative can, and to assert the power of literature against neuroscience's growing cultural authority.

- 34 For Francisco Ortega and Fernando Vidal, “neuronovels provide a neurochemical depiction of interiority” (337). Ortega and Vidal explain that “after the ‘neural turn,’ writing fictionally about consciousness seems to call for a neurobiologizing vocabulary” (340). But Krauss’s *Man Walks into a Room* poses a challenge to their argument. There is no “neurobiologizing vocabulary,” let alone any “neurochemical depictions of interiority” in her neuronovel. On the contrary, to represent her main character’s consciousness she returns to traditional strategies such as “emotive character studies” (Burn, “Mapping” 43) and the extensive use of images. In other words, she allows “the kind of traditional stuff” (Franzen quoted by Burn, “Mapping” 43) that the postmodernists had omitted. Even her neuroscientist hardly ever uses the language of neuroscience: ironically, he borrows discursive strategies from the humanities.
- 35 In Krauss’s book, the new neuronovel is combined with more conventional genres all copiously revised. Generic experimentation is no doubt the most salient characteristic of the novel—and it is far more successful than the brain experiments conducted by her neuroscientist. Her traditional narrative strategy also stands out. It is no mere detail that she should yoke the third and the first-person narrative in the four main chapters of the book—she could after all have written a first-person narrative throughout and not merely in the epilogue, as many other neuronovelists have done. This strategy allows Krauss to represent fictional consciousness *and* to challenge the so-called objectivity of the third-person narrative. The juxtaposition of these different narrative strategies in the novel somehow puts them on an equal footing; but only literature can have access to the first-person of consciousness.
- 36 Through her amnesiac, and all the characters he comes across, Krauss shows that “the individual self is not a fixed and stable entity, but is constantly being created and modified in consciousness through interaction with others and the world” (Lodge 91). Thus she “challenges the belief that personhood and brainhood reside essentially in the brain” (Ortega and Vidal 342). *Man Walks into a Room* is indeed a narrative that counters the recently invented master narrative of the materialist self, and finds meaning “outside of the emplotments which are ordinarily available” (Andrews 1). Krauss certainly resists the growing influence of neuroscience, and the reductionist “rhetoric”²⁷ (Tougaw, *Elusive Brain* 13) that developed in the 1990s. Her resistance consists, in particular, in a display of the power, even plasticity, of literature when it comes to representing consciousness and the self.

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NOTES

1. "Retrograde amnesia (RA) refers to loss of memory for information acquired before the onset of amnesia" (Reed and Squire 3943).
2. Korsakov syndrome is "a chronic memory disorder caused by severe deficiency of thiamine (vitamin B-1). Korsakoff syndrome is most commonly caused by alcohol misuse." <https://www.alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/what-is-dementia/types-of-dementia/korsakoff-syndrome>. Accessed 18 Aug 2020.
3. "Semantic memory contains relatively generic, context-free information about the world.... Semantic memory lacks a source tag—it does not specify when or where the memory was acquired.... In contrast, episodic memory records events as having been experienced at a particular point in space and time.... An episodic memory represents the 'what, where, when' of an event" (Klein and Nichols 679).
4. In the passage Tougaw analyzes Suzanne Corkin's *Permanent Present Tense: The Unforgettable Life of the Amnesiac Patient H. M.* (2013), and Alix Kate Shulman's *To Love What Is: A Marriage Transformed* (2009).
5. *Man Walks into a Room* will be referred to as MWR throughout this essay.

6. The evocation may also be ironic, as suggested by the past participle “forgotten” and the “dead end” associated with Dr. Lavell’s office.
7. Samson is watching his brain waves peak across a screen.
8. “Philosophers Daniel Dennett and Patricia Churchland argue that ... qualia, or feelings, are explained fully by the neural activity associated with them—a view echoed by ‘you are your brain’ neuroscientists like Francis Crick and Dick Swaab.... While some philosophers argue that qualia represent an intractable epistemological problem, that we probably will never understand the precise relation between matter and mind, most theoretical neuroscientists take the position that we don’t know enough yet, but we will one day” (Tougaw, *Elusive Brain* 4).
9. Besides, while the place was initially centered on the body, it has turned into a lab for brain manipulation.
10. When Malcolm describes his experiments to Samson one day, he uses the colloquial language of everyday life: “We are out there engineering something truly fucking amazing. Getting inside the brain in a way that’s never happened before. It’s a beautiful thing” (MWR 90).
11. In his words, even the desert where he conducts his experiments becomes a highly symbolic, even religious place: “In the monastic tradition the desert is a sacred place of simultaneous being and nothingness, Ray had said. A proving ground in which the sense of individuality is obliterated on the way to achieving a higher state” (MWR 91).
12. The episode in the desert may call to mind the “Manhattan Project” in the forties that gathered the brightest scientists in the New Mexico desert to build the first atomic bomb, or the bomb tests also conducted in the desert during the Cold War (MWR 116), with their sinister aftermath—as suggested by the “Prelude” to the novel, that is, the traumatic memory of a 1957 bomb blast, which is eventually implanted in Samson’s brain.
13. See Francisco Ortega and Fernando Vidal, “Brains in Literature, Literature in the Brain” (334-336).
14. For the sake of simplicity and following Kenneth Millard, the term coming-of-age narrative will be used in its broadest sense, as a mere synonym of *Bildungsroman* in this essay.
15. “Since its settlement was the last stage in the completion of the country, thus marking the closing of a crucial period in American history, the West has had a special place in the nation’s self-image, and it has always been considered as central in the construction of American identity” (Massip).
16. Donald is also grotesque because of the impersonations he does (MWR 115). Each of them suggests another identity that he takes on—and from this point of view he is not so different from the other teachers or guides.
17. “[I]f I understand that you are in pain without feeling it myself, that is what psychologists describe as social cognition, social intelligence, mind reading, theory of mind, or mentalizing. It’s also described as a form of empathy—‘cognitive empathy’ as opposed to emotional empathy” (Bloom 16). Emotional empathy, by contrast, is what “drives people to treat others’ suffering as if it were their own, which then motivates action to make the suffering go away” (Bloom 29).
18. “But how can one regret what, to the mind, has never existed? Even loss is an inaccurate description, for what is loss without the awareness of losing?” (MWR 16).
19. In the Bible, Luke, the Apostle, is said to be an educated man, probably a physician.
20. A symbolic name—from the Latin *patricius*—which may represent the symbolic importance of the girl in Samson’s rebuilding process.
21. Burn does not cite Krauss’s *Man Walks into a Room* as an example, but he mentions *The Unnamed* (2010) by Joshua Ferris.
22. This gift of the Bible may also represent Samson’s return to The Book and, thereby, books—he used to be a professor—and his departure from neural imagery.

23. Max was also uprooted: not only did he have to leave Germany and find refuge in America during the war, but the Nazis took his family “and destroyed all traces of his former life” (MWR 223).

24. There are ten sections in chapter 1, eight in chapter 2, five in chapter 3 and only one in chapter 4—as if to suggest Samson’s growing coherence.

25. David Punter does not distinguish between metaphor and simile: “it has sometimes been supposed that simile is a different figure of speech from metaphor; but in fact it is a sub-species of metaphor, which is distinct only in that it keeps the notion of comparison explicit” (3). I will take a different stance in this essay and distinguish them.

26. Interestingly, Lodge then quotes the famous passage from Joseph Conrad’s Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*: “My task which I am trying to achieve, is by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is before all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything” (Conrad xlix).

27. “Even the staunchest reductionists don’t believe that anybody is simply a brain. But the rhetoric persists.... [T]hey acknowledge both the epistemological limits of their own theories and the many dimensions of self that can’t simply be reduced to brain” (Tougaw, *Elusive Brain* 13).

ABSTRACTS

In *Man Walks into a Room*, a neuronovel staging an amnesiac, Nicole Krauss challenges the memory-identity equation. While she draws on neuroscience, she also writes against it, as she emphasizes the explanatory gap and the problem of qualia. To resist the growing authority of neuroscience and its often reductionist discourse, Krauss features a neurosurgeon as a mad scientist coming straight out of a science-fiction novel, who uses discursive strategies borrowed from the humanities. She also displays the power and plasticity of literary narrative. Hence, her generic experimentations—borrowing from traditional genres, revising and combining them—are far more successful than her scientist’s brain experiments. In numerous passages focused on ordinary moments of life, Krauss draws her reader’s attention to the singularity of experience and the power of storytelling, through figuration in particular, to account for it.

INDEX

Keywords: Nicole Krauss, neuronovel, amnesia, consciousness, explanatory gap, genre

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