

Reflections On the Work of Paul Auster



In the introduction to his controversial novel *Crash*, JG Ballard writes, 'we live inside an enormous novel.' This phrase is immediately evocative to those of us who base our understanding of the world, and of the reality which surrounds us, on the abundant fictions within which we lose ourselves, whether we find those fictions on the screen, on the stage or on the printed page. Ballard's comment encourages us to ponder the significance of make-believe, of storytelling, of the fictional: why this compulsion to invent? What gives us our need to fabricate existence, to spin yarns, to take from personal experience or pure fancy and generate imaginary situations, characters and lives? Yet in talking of this 'enormous novel' Ballard is concerned less with uncovering the locus of the creative impulse, and more with the manner in which any objective notions of truth and reality are attacked on a daily basis by the constant fictions of 'mass merchandising, advertising (and) politics.' Ballard believes these fictions have a deleterious effect on our sense of self and our notions of identity; for him therefore, being as we are, surrounded by the fake, the false and the fabricated, it is not the writer's task to invent the fiction, but rather to 'invent the reality.'

Paul Auster is a writer, who, like Beckett, is obsessed with identity and the way it is constructed out of and through the medium of stories, words, or even the thinnest of airs. He places great emphasis on the need for storytelling. His characters are restless inquisitors, asking endless questions of life, undertaking journeys across the vastness of America, often in solitude, in pursuit of ends which even they themselves are unaware; and if these characters are not travelling outwards, then there is always the journey within. Indeed the odyssey, of one kind or another, be it on a large or a small scale, exterior or interior, is central to almost all his work. Auster's meandering creations seek the means by which they can live: by which they can be alive in the fullest sense. They are characters in search of an independent existence. Auster, like Ballard, is an author who subscribes to the belief that it is only through the construction of reality that we are truly able to perceive, rationalise and comprehend the one within which we are forced to spend our lives; he is

fascinated by the breaking down of the boundaries between what is lived and what is read; and the blurring of the distinction between what is experienced and what is written.

Paul Auster, now in his late fifties, first gained international renown with three stories published collectively as *The New York Trilogy* (1987). An inspired subversion of the conventions of the detective genre, each of the novellas take the reader on surreal, elliptical, smoke and mirrors journeys, in which ends are not only left untied but fraying at the edges. We are in a world of mazes and parallels. The stories deal with the search for personal meaning, and the metaphysical crisis that ensues if one accepts that the self is fractured and divided, rather than fixed and immutable. *City of Glass* (1985) is the story of a crime novelist who becomes enmeshed in a mysterious series of events, which means he has to assume a variety of identities, masks and disguises. *Ghosts* (1986) concerns a private detective called Blue who is investigating a man named Black for a client named White. Who is watching whom? *The Locked Room* (1986), perhaps the most powerful of the three, is the tale of an author who, while researching the life of a missing writer for a biography, gradually begins to assume his identity. The stories examine solitude and obsession, of how one informs the other, and underlying all three is an atmosphere of disenchantment and dislocation, the absurdity of searching for something nameless, something beyond reach, something which is, by definition, unknowable.

Auster was born in New Jersey but has spent the last thirty years living in New York. Like Woody Allen, he is a chronicler of the city and takes its streets and hidden corners as the setting for much of his work. A graduate of Columbia University, Auster left the USA in the mid seventies and spent four years living in France. Upon his return to New York he published poetry, essays and translations and interviewed various literary figures of the day. In the late nineteen seventies his father's death provoked a dramatic change in his life. Able to live off the money he inherited in the will, he dedicated more and more time to writing. He produced *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) an extraordinary work which is very difficult to categorize. Part memoir, part biography of his father, part autobiography; it is also a meditation on loss, familial love, fatherhood and memory. Impressionistic, subtle and often extremely touching, it is unique in Auster's oeuvre, and moves quietly from eloquent scrap of history to beautiful fragment of recollection, combining commentary with autobiography, essay with sketch. The opening, 'one day there is life...and then, suddenly, there is death,' sets a mood which Auster sustains throughout. Personal, full of heart and intellect, Auster engages the reader immediately; we follow him in his attempt to make sense of life and the inevitability of death. His pain at the passing of his father, a man he is attempting to understand through the writing of the book, is apparent throughout.

The *Invention of Solitude* went some way to establishing Auster's reputation. After its publication he decided to dedicate himself to fiction, and in the mid nineteen eighties published the stories which would make up *The New York Trilogy*. Since that time he has published eight novels as well as the

screenplays for *Smoke*, *Blue in the Face* and *Lulu on the Bridge*. He has also published *Hand to Mouth* (1997), a memoir of his time in France and his early struggles as a writer, and has overseen an America-wide project to collect real stories, initially broadcast on radio and subsequently published as *True Tales of American Life*. (2001)

A feature of Auster's writing is that he is always present; his own life is somehow filtered through his work. Not merely through the use of biographical sketches but by the use of his own name and that of his wife. In *City of Glass*, Quinn, the protagonist, pretends to be a private eye called Paul Auster, meets the real Paul Auster, i.e. the writer and his wife named Siri. The wife in *Leviathan* (1992) is called Iris (a simple rearrangement of letters). Orr, the main character in *Oracle Night* (2004) lives, just like Auster, in a Brownstone in Brooklyn and on the back cover of *Leviathan*, the protagonist is misnamed Paul Aaron (he is in fact called Peter Aaron but one gets the sense that this is deliberate.) But we should not linger too much here for this is an evitable act of writing, whether conscious or unconscious, no writer can absent himself entirely from the work he produces, no matter what Roland Barthes may say.

It is perhaps no surprise that Auster's favourite book is *Don Quixote*, for, like Cervantes, Auster's work is multi-layered, story is wrapped within story, a Russian doll effect, each tale somehow interlinked with the next so that the multitude of fictions chime together in unexpected ways, which invest the whole with an almost choral quality, even if that quality can be cacophonous and disturbing. Voice competes with voice, character with character, and all is so tightly controlled and technically so accomplished that the reader, taken deeply within the fiction, loses the sense that it is indeed just that, a fiction.

Many of Auster's protagonists are themselves writers and many of his novels begin with a character looking back on an event. His last two novels, *The Book of Illusions* (2002) and *Oracle Night*, have dealt with men troubled by personal tragedy and serious illness. These characters seek, through investigation and the process of storytelling, to recover not only their sense of self, but also the means by which they can ground themselves in a world from which they have been cut adrift. They are stories, which whilst full of Auster's typical concerns with the significance of writers and writing, of appearance and disappearance, of absence and presence, also deal with love and loss, recovery and forgiveness, perhaps indicating a potential new direction for the writer's future work.

In *Oracle Night* Sydney Orr, recovering from a near fatal illness, chances upon a blue 'cloth-bound' Portuguese notebook while out on a walk one day. The notebook exerts an immediate hold over him. Orr sees it as a means of creative rejuvenation. He finds it 'deeply satisfying' and even if it is nothing more than 'stolid, homely (and) serviceable' in touching it he feels 'something akin to pleasure.' Inspired by a tale told by a character in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, which his friend, fellow novelist Trause alerts him to, Orr begins to develop his own version and starts writing it in the notebook. Despite his initial confidence at the return of his ability to write, Orr

begins to spiral into an intense journey in which he begins to lose sight of himself and those around him. At one point he seems to be writing so furiously in his book that his wife does not even notice he is there. Indeed *Oracle Night* reads like a ghost story, only the **ghosts are not only from without but also within**. Like **Arthur's Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle***, the inspiration for **Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut***, *Oracle Night* is a waking dream, in which phantoms and shadows lurk, nowhere more apparent than in the mind of the protagonist, who invents and reinvents, flies away and returns, shaken, unsure, somehow the same yet altered in ways he cannot imagine.

The story that Orr writes in his notebook is, in essence, nothing more than an urban myth, that of a man who simply disappears from one life to reinvent himself in another. The idea that one can radically transform one's life by the simple act of flight is a common theme of Auster's fiction; his characters wander out of their lives, assuming new identities, experimenting with boundaries and railing against the confines of individual identity. In *Leviathan* Benjamin Sachs falls from a balcony and his life changes radically as a result; in *The Book of Illusions* Hector Mann runs away after having committed a crime; and in *Moon Palace* (1989) Barber changes into Effing.

Auster's narrative voice is comfortable and sublimely assured, and, given his abstract and **existential preoccupations**, oddly conversational. He achieves something rare in fiction: the combination of the novel of ideas with a compulsively readable style. Auster's books are true page-turners. Like **Graham Greene** he generates an extraordinary **excitement and tension**, and like the writer of *Brighton Rock* he invests his work with an intellectual depth lacking in much contemporary fiction. Auster is also reminiscent of WG **Sebald** and **Milan Kundera**, for like them, he is unafraid of tackling the big themes: **fate, the nature of being, the search for happiness**.

Postmodern game playing and the juxtaposing of the supposedly real with the imaginary, are marked aspects of Auster's style; and there are those critics who dismiss him for what is usually termed **metafiction**, that is, **fiction engaged in a dialogue with itself, a story which calls attention to the telling of the story**. This is something which is widely appreciated in continental Europe, particularly in France where Auster regularly hits the bestseller lists. In the US and the UK, cultures which are far more intellectually conservative, there seems to be a fear of this kind of writing, a desire to label it the work of an intelligence that has lost itself to creative navel gazing and an absence of conviction. Yet for those readers who share Auster's worldview, his belief in the **quixotic fluidity of existence, its chaos, its lack of order, its inherent reliance upon the unpredictable, upon the twists and turns of fate, chance and coincidence** - as he says in *Oracle Night*, **'randomness stalks us every day of our lives'** - will find within his work a speculative restless centre, around which an undoubted belief in the tragic beauty of life turns.

Relentlessly **rhythmical** even in its apparent simplicity, there is a music to Auster's prose, not surprising given that he has published several collections of poetry, a music which grows from the accumulation of **metaphysical**

speculation, an intellectual questing couched not in abstruse academic terms but rather in a language which is immediately accessible. Auster almost always writes in the **first person** and it is his **ability to inhabit his characters body and soul**, which gives his work its vivacity. Whether in the mind of a dog (*Timbukto*; 1999), a boy with the ability to fly (*Mr Vertigo*; 1994) or a woman adrift in a landscape of political decay and terminal metropolitan collapse (*In the Country of Last Things*; 1987) Auster convinces.

In 2001, *Atlantic Monthly* launched a vituperative attack on the reputations of a variety of American writers including Don DeLillo, E Annie Proulx and David Guterson. BR Myers wrote scathingly of Auster, '(he) knows the prime rule of pseudo-intellectual writing...the harder it is to be pinned down on any idea, the easier it is to conceal that one has no ideas at all.' This is unfair for it suggests that there is a universal truth which writers are obliged to investigate; that there is some kind of agreement which must be reached. **In his work Auster is concerned with the subjectivity of existence, with the multiplicity of ways of perception and the fear of a lack of fixed identity.** These are his ideas and he has developed an impressive body of work exploring them. He has achieved something remarkable and for this he deserves to be celebrated: it is nothing less than the transformation of the coincidental chaos of diurnal life into art.

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