The Invention of Illusions

The Invention of Illusions: International Perspectives on Paul Auster

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

STEFANIA CIOCIA
AND JESÚS ÁNGEL GONZÁLEZ

At the time of writing, it has been fifteen years since the publication of *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster* (1995), the seminal collection of essays edited by Dennis Barone which marked the beginning of sustained academic critical attention on the New York author. Barone begins his introduction by drawing attention to the remarkable speed of Auster's ascent in popularity—a sudden reversal of fortune that is part of the writer's own self-mythology—particularly on the score of the success of *The New York Trilogy* (1987), the trio of interconnected metaphysical detective novels which still remains his most widely read (and studied) work. In explaining the rationale for his collection, Barone hypothesises that the rapidity of Auster's rise to fame might have been the reason for the lack of scholarship on his work, and concludes his introductory essay with the prescient wish that his volume would promote the development of further criticism on Auster—a desire reiterated by Patricia Merivale who, in her appraisal of the state of Auster scholarship in a piece written for *Contemporary Literature* in 1997, could not help but remark, with undisguised puzzlement, that Auster critics had lagged behind those of other prestigious authors coming to prominence in the Eighties, such as J.M. Coetzee, William Gibson or even Don DeLillo.

Merivale's call for a more extensive academic response to the work of "an author with so impassioned a following in both North America and Europe" (Merivale 1997, 186) has not gone unheeded. In fact, as Barone had predicted, Auster scholarship witnessed "an exponential growth in the late 1990s" (Barone 1995, 1) and continues to thrive, not least because the twenty-first century has so far proven to be a very prolific time for this distinctive writer.

Since 1995, Auster has published seven novels (with another one, *Sunset Park*, scheduled for publication in November 2010) and a couple of biographical pieces; he has directed—or otherwise collaborated in the making of—four films, and has edited books as different as a collection of

non-fictional pieces by National Public Radio's listeners (*True Tales of American Life*, [2001]) and Samuel Beckett's complete works (2006). He has retained—and indeed positively fostered with his many auto-intertextual connections—his staunch following, and has strengthened his popularity particularly in Europe, where he seems to have more devotees than at home—as shown by the several prizes he has received, such as the Spanish Prince of Asturias Award in 2006 or the French grade of Commander of the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 2007.

The fact that Auster acquired instant cult status by managing to strike a difficult balance between a strong intellectual appeal and mainstream success may perhaps be the true mark of his postmodernity, a label that he himself dislikes.[1] But now that the general theoretical debate has shifted from a definition and a critique of postmodernism to a reflection on whether or how we can claim to have entered a post-postmodern phase, Auster continues to make waves on the literary scene, garnering "the best reviews and the worst reviews of any writer I know"—as he said in an interview in *The Washington Post* (online edition)[2]—and attracting significant scholarly interest. Three of the contributors to this very collection have authored monographs on him: Aliki Varvogli has published *The World that is the Book. Paul Auster's Fiction* in 2001 with Liverpool University Press; Mark Brown's *Paul Auster*, written for the 'Contemporary American and Canadian Novelists' series for Manchester University Press, has come out in 2007, while James Peacock's *Understanding Paul Auster*, out in 2009 with the University of South Carolina Press, is the latest book-length study of this author to date.

Before them, critics in continental Europe had been faster to react to Auster's early success: Marc Chénetier had published *Paul Auster as the Wizard of Odds* (Paris: Didier, 1996), dealing exclusively with *Moon Palace* (1989), while Anne M. Holzapfel had focused her analysis on Auster's earliest fictional work in *The New York Trilogy: Whodunit? Tracking the Structure of Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Novels* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996) and Bernd Herzogenrath had published *An Art of Desire. Reading Paul Auster* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), offering a Lacanian perspective on the writer's output. Two further thematic studies of Auster came out with Peter Lang in 2001 and 2002 respectively: Carsten Springer's *Crises: The Work of Paul Auster* and Ilana Shiloh's *Paul Auster and the Postmodern Quest*. They have recently been followed by Brendan Martin's *Paul Auster's Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 2008), another monograph concerned with tracing the extent of the author's affinities with this cultural category.

This cursory account of the volumes devoted exclusively to Auster—an account that becomes much longer when works written in languages other than English are considered[3]—would not be complete without the mention of the collection of essays published in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views* series for Chelsea House in 2004; with this compilation of previously published scholarly pieces, Harold Bloom sanctions Auster's canonicity, somewhat reluctantly perhaps, but without a shadow of a doubt: in fact, in his concise introductory editorial comments, having voiced his reservations about Auster's greatness vis-à-vis those "elliptical literary artists" (Beckett, Kafka, Hamsun, Celan, etc.) who have inspired him, Bloom makes a generous and gracious admission: "If Auster evades me, I ... blame myself" (2).

Where does the present collection fit in, then, within the context of such a remarkable proliferation of critical activity around Paul Auster? In planning and putting together this book, our intention has been to follow the example of *Beyond the Red Notebook*, and of course supplement the recent monographs, with another polyphonic volume of original essays on those Austerian texts and themes in need of (re)assessment, either in the form of an updated summative reading which could draw connections between the author's early and later production, or of a fresh and thought-provoking alternative to previous analyses, or even—in the case of very recent work—of initial scholarly responses.

In order to do this—and in keeping with Paul Auster's transatlantic appeal and engagement with various media—we have deliberately sought collaborations from as international and eclectic an academic context as it has been possible: our contributors, both for their background and institutional affiliation, represent a number of different countries, cultural traditions and (inter)disciplinary approaches. We have also been especially keen to focus on Auster's twenty-first-century output, given how—in the wake of 9/11—questions about the importance and the power of narrative acts, the relationship between the personal and the public, the interplay between fiction and history, and the relevance of storytelling to the processing of traumatic or otherwise epochal events have now become more pressing than ever.

In the light of these topical concerns, more often than not and regardless of their individual starting point or specific object of analysis, the contributors to this volume have been naturally drawn to muse about Auster's position in the American canon and on the global literary scene, as well as to reflect on the trajectory of his oeuvre and his development as a consummate practitioner and theorist of the art of storytelling across different genres and media.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, one of the most recurrent issues to have cropped up in response to our call for papers, and to have then been reflected in the final selection of essays, has been the need to go beyond a reading of Auster as the endlessly self-referential postmodern writer, with a tried and tested repertoire of signature themes and narrative ploys, addressed at a captive audience of adepts. Admittedly, this is a cliché that Auster himself seems to have courted with some of his projects, most notably with the relatively recent *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006), a short novel whose interpretation is substantially dependent on the readers' knowledge of Auster's previous work. And yet, as a number of chapters of this book make clear, this text has a depth of meaning unacknowledged by its early reviewers, who had generally decried it as a sign of Auster's terminally narcissistic involution, or an exasperation of the pared-down intellectualism that, two decades before, had made the fortune of *The New York Trilogy*.

Against this interpretative trend, several of our contributors have been eager to highlight the political drive of Auster's most recent production, particularly in those texts where collective concerns of historical magnitude appear to be dismissed in the same breath in which they are articulated. Consider, for example, the case of *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005): at a first glance, it has often been seen at best as a jolly, naïve celebration of the communal spirit fostered by New York's most populous borough, even in (or especially in) the wake of 9/11, for a brief mention of the terrorist attacks brings the novel to a close and thus frames, retrospectively, the entire narration. Incidentally, the text's focus on the various—however improbable and haphazard—local support networks sprouting in Brooklyn has probably exacerbated the disappointed response at the ostensibly inward-looking, more-rarefied-than-ever scope of *Travels in the Scriptorium*, perceived by some as an about-turn from a writer who had finally started talking about "real" people.

The easiness with which both *The Brooklyn Follies* and *Travels in the Scriptorium* have lent themselves to simplistic, dismissive readings might account for the fact that they are the most represented works in this collection, together with *The Book of Illusions* (2002), whose own popularity amongst our contributors is explained by its obvious status as a fruitful entry point into the discussion of Auster's interest in film. Besides, while they are possibly the two novels in Auster's corpus most in need of critical redress, both *The Brooklyn Follies* and *Travels in the Scriptorium* are in many ways, and for different reasons, very typical of the author's production. *The Brooklyn Follies* provides a remarkable example of Auster's storytelling at its most expansive and sentimental; at the opposite

end of the narrative spectrum, *Travels in the Scriptorium* takes us back to the author's metaphysical roots, while being—at times quite literally—a compendium of his work.

In view of how representative they are of these two complementary drives in Auster's writing, it is no wonder that *The Brooklyn Follies* and *Travels in the Scriptorium* should have sparked such a flurry of exegetical activity in the present volume. Together with *Man in the Dark* (2008), these two very different narratives can be said to form a(n admittedly rather unlikely) second trilogy,[4] as argued by the two contributors who open our collection by configuring the three works as Auster's response not so much to 9/11, but to the ensuing "war on terror" and George W. Bush's foreign policy.

PAOLO SIMONETTI finds a further context for his analysis of the second trilogy in the debate about the state of realism after postmodernism. He argues that in his revisitation of genres such as the realist novel, the metafictional novel and the counterfactual history, Auster inscribes himself within the American, Hawthornian tradition of the Romancer, with its investment in the power of storytelling through the creation of fictions imbued with a deep historical and mythical consciousness. In her discussion of the same texts, ALIKI VARVOGLI also engages with Auster's commitment to fiction-writing, not as a way of affecting the world directly, but as a creative *process*—an ongoing, exploratory, dynamic activity—that helps us become aware of and test the boundaries between the real and the (im)possible. In particular, her reading of the three novels focuses on their relationship with the idea of America as utopia and dystopia.

ANITA DURKIN instead conducts her political reading of *The Brooklyn Follies* by pairing it to the earlier *Timbuktu* (1999) in an analysis of how configurations of place in the two novels are often tied in with the American history and practice of racial oppression. She also goes decidedly against the grain of common (mis)interpretations of Auster's unbounded faith in fabulation, when she argues that both texts under scrutiny present the dark side of storytelling in highlighting how books and writing itself have partaken and can still partake of oppressive politics. JAMES PEACOCK continues the examination of *The Brooklyn Follies* by performing an extended analysis of its complex engagement with the interconnected notions of originality, forgery and authenticity. Having suggested that this text might well be regarded as Auster's first post-postmodern novel, Peacock reads it as a celebration and perhaps even an enactment of the paradoxical notion of the "true fake", a catalyst for reconciliations of opposites when performance and imitation give way to

the establishment and/or the discovery of deep, essential resemblances and sympathetic connections. In doing so, Peacock's piece foregrounds a theme that informs several other analyses in this collection: the relationship between creative ventures and the opening up of an ethical sphere.

The following chapter leads us into relatively uncharted territory in Auster's scholarship, as STEFANIA CIOCIA focuses on *Oracle Night* (2004) and sets out to query the author's gender politics with her focus on the role of women in his novels. In particular, Ciocia analyses the hidden implications of Auster's long-lasting affair with the trope of the *donna angelicata*, the beatific woman whose sudden appearance on the scene is often configured as a miraculous act of sense-making and provider of narrative closure, those least postmodern of portents which otherwise elude most Austerian characters.

GINEVRA GERACI's reading of *Travels in the Scriptorium* takes us back to the analysis of ethical questions, especially in relation to the authorial role, and the author's responsibility towards fictional creations and readers alike. Drawing on Ricoeur's hermeneutics for her theoretical background, Geraci complements her discussion of the Beckettian traces in *Travels* with an investigation of the Pirandellian legacies in Auster's adoption of an ironical stance and in the metatheatrical conventions discernible in that text. MICHELLE BANKS, instead, looks at a different manifestation of Auster's metafictional drive: his often much maligned auto-intertextuality, typically dismissed by negative critics of his work as postmodern narcissism and gamesmanship. Banks chooses to focus primarily on recurring characters as the clearest markers of the stability (or otherwise) of the fictional world created by Auster's entire oeuvre, and inevitably ends up discussing *Travels* as a hub of such reappearances. While seemingly hinting at the consistency of Auster's fictional world, the *retour de personnages* in *Travels*, as in other Austerian texts, actually destabilizes it, for there are often small, but clearly visible discrepancies in the characters' reincarnations from one narrative to the next. This move, Banks argues, underscores the presence of necessity, choice and chance in these fictional connections and, by extension, in our approach to the world and to our individual and collective hermeneutical projects.

ULRICH MEURER shares Banks' wide textual scope, for he provides a topography of how Auster's works inhabit a liminal space, often crossing boundaries between different media and between the fictional and the factual. This chapter builds up to the mapping out of Auster's most daring hybrid enterprises, i.e. those actualizations, in the real world, of projects originally charted only in fiction-writing, such as, for example, Auster's

collaboration with the conceptualist artist Sophie Calle or the making of *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* (a film directed by Auster and based on a fictional film described in *The Book of Illusions*).

Auster's interest in cinema, and in its interplay with writing, is the subject of the next three pieces in the collection. The first is JESÚS ÁNGEL GONZÁLEZ's comparative analysis of Auster's "films about words" and novels about films. Having initially posited the movement from narrative fiction to film as a continuation of Auster's "opening of the fist" from poetry to narrative fiction, González argues that Auster's engagement with the cinematic medium is marked by the need to overcome the two-dimensionality of this artistic form. Auster finds this third dimension in his (both real and written) films by demanding the reader/viewer's moral and epistemological involvement in the creative and hermeneutical acts, through multiple viewings, through the identification of intertextual and metafictional connections or even, more generally, through an active subscription to the idea that we find meaning in our individual lives when we relate them to other people's stories.

Following this overview of Auster's fascination with cinema, and awareness of its limitation, is MARK BROWN's reading of *The Book of Illusions* and of the correlation between place and identity in this, as indeed in other, Austerian novels. Like González, Brown points out how Auster ultimately privileges the narrative form in spite of his interest in the cinematic medium—part of whose charm comes precisely from its insubstantiality and its dream-like quality. This lack of physicality also seems to run counter to Auster's investment in the importance of place in our self-perception and continuing development. In *The Book of Illusions* the word turns out to be more enduring than the image, and storytelling becomes a more powerful act than a physical journey of (self-)exploration involving either the discovery or the escape from one's past. It is in the stories woven by the various characters for themselves and for other people that we can trace the least evanescent of processes of identity formation.

ALAN BILTON also looks at *The Book of Illusions*, as an obvious starting point for his investigation of Auster's interest in the phantasmal nature of silent film. Having identified Raymond Griffith—a spectral figure in his own right since almost none of his films have survived—as the real-life source of inspiration for the novel's protagonist Hector Mann, Bilton proceeds to outline Auster's continuous thematization of the fragile balance and the paradoxical interplay between presence and absence both in life and art. Incidentally, this is a recurrent obsession in Auster's work; indeed, it can be said to underpin the original Austerian self-myth, the

presence/absence of an "invisible" father figure, as well as the writer's ongoing preoccupation with posthumous, phantasmal narratives or the contrast between his (American?) fabulatory penchant and his (European?) Beckettian search for a naked form of language.

Finally, FRANÇOIS HUGONNIER focuses on that crucial dichotomy that runs through Auster's entire artistic career: the one between language and silence, the speakable and the unspeakable, and the writer's ensuing quest to find ways of articulating what cannot be said. Hugonnier recapitulates the recurrent concern with the limits of language in a discussion which, starting from Auster's beginnings as a critic and a poet, goes on to cover his development as a fiction writer up to as late a novel as *Invisible* (2009).

In the already mentioned 1997 review of Auster's early reception, Patricia Merivale asked when the critical dust would settle and allow for an equanimous assessment of the writer's production, lamenting a general inability on the part of the scholars to trace a sense of trajectory in his entire output, then dominated, even more than it is now, by the (academic and non-academic) readers' privileging of *The New York Trilogy* over his other works. With her call for a more comprehensive and balanced perspective on the place of the *Trilogy* in the Austerian canon, Merivale also put forth the idea that Auster at one point seemed to have changed direction, from the minimalist, intellectual postmodern writer of his narrative beginnings to a more "humanist" storyteller; a painter on a wider canvas with larger and more concrete ethical and social concerns, the explorer of the big American themes, say, of *Moon Palace* (1989), an early novel which alone can be said to have sparked as much critical activity as Auster's first foray into fiction.

More than a decade on, we can safely say that Auster has continued to cultivate this oscillation between, on the one hand, the philosophical musings on the fragility of the human predicament and the linguistic medium and, on the other, the extroverted celebrations of our imaginative, emotional and communicative resources; between a sort of asceticism in his choice of themes and language and an exploration of the accidental or necessary interconnections that make up the rich texture of our experience of the world, of one another and of ourselves. In fact, in later texts, such as *The Book of Illusions* or the second trilogy, Auster positively demands that we acknowledge the complementary nature of the two drives that underpin his writing: the productive tension between inside and outside, the locked room and the wide world, Self and Other, imagination and reality, presence and absence, linguistic abstractions and ethical actions. If anything can be surmised from the contributions of the different scholars taking part in *The Invention of Illusions* is that this constant dialectical

tension is still at the heart of Auster's work, and now matters more than ever.

As already mentioned, in composing this volume, our intention has been to write a *Beyond the Red Notebook* for the twenty-first century: if Barone's collection had set a benchmark and prompted a boom in Auster scholarship, *The Invention of Illusions* wants to reinvigorate that critical tradition which, in recent years—particularly at the level of book reviews—has occasionally been a little hasty and superficial, and therefore also ungenerous. It is perhaps now time to debunk, once and for all, the self-perpetuating myth of Paul Auster, Brooklynite bard of "Gothic good looks" (Akbar 2009) and easy charm, endlessly capitalizing on a few skilful narrative tricks, executed with the grace and levity of the seasoned magician, whose dazzling illusions ultimately leave no real mark on the audience. While, to phrase it in Merivale's terms, the critical dust won't settle until Auster puts away his trusted Olympia typewriter, this collection invites us to take another look at Auster as an inventor of illusions in the most positive sense of this word: not as short-lived, deceitful gimmickry, but rather as an imaginative testing of possibilities, a wilful establishment of real bonds between people, even if these bonds are rooted in the illusive—and elusive—world of storytelling.

The best example of this sort of connections is provided by Auster himself when Tom tells Nathan the anecdote of Kafka and the lost doll, such a powerful story that all the commentators in this volume who have dealt with *The Brooklyn Follies* have chosen to dwell on it. In telling us this least Kafkaesque of tales—the story of how the great writer spent three weeks composing letters from a missing doll, in order to cure its young owner from the sadness caused by her loss—Paul Auster reiterates once more his belief in the power of fiction to help us make sense, relate and somehow come to terms with the world inside and outside us. They might not be all-powerful remedies, but good stories, be they lived, acted out, told, read, seen, dreamt, imagined or experienced in any other possible way, perform an essential function in our collective and individual existence, as Auster himself declared when he received the Prince of Asturias award in 2006:

> From the moment we learn to talk, we begin to develop a hunger for stories ... human beings need stories. They need them almost as desperately as they need food, and however the stories might be presented ... it would be impossible to imagine life without them. That explains the particular power of the novel, and why in my opinion, it will never die as a form. Every novel is an equal collaboration between the writer and the reader, and it is the only place in the world where two strangers can meet

> on terms of absolute intimacy. I have spent my life in conversations with people I have never seen, with people I will never know, and I hope to continue until the day I stop breathing. It's the only job I've ever wanted. (Auster 2006b)

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Notes

[1] Joint Q & A session with Pedro Almodóvar in Gijón, Spain, prior to the reception of the Prince of Asturias award, October 19, 2006.

[2] As an example, James Wood wrote in his review of *Invisible* for *The New Yorker* that Auster "does nothing with cliché except use it" and he gets "the worst of both worlds: fake realism and shallow skepticism". In contrast, Clancy Martin in *The New York Times* called the book "American writing at its best".

[3] In France, Annick Duperray had edited *L'œuvre de Paul Auster* in 1995 (Paris: Actes Sud, 1995), while 1996 saw an impressive three books published on *Moon Palace*: Catherine Pesso-Miquel's *Toiles roués et déserts lunaires dans* Moon Palace *de Paul Auster* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne, 1996), François Gallix's edition of *Lectures d'une oeuvre:* Moon Palace (Paris: Éditions du Temps, 1996) and Yves-Charles Grandjeat's edition of the collection *Moon Palace: Paul Auster* (Paris : Ellipses, 1996). Later on, François Gavillon wrote *Paul Auster: Gravité et légèreté de l'écriture* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2000), and Gérard de Cortanze published *La solitude du labyrinthe* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1997). More recently, Catherine Quarré Roger has published *Paul Auster: L'enchanteur désenchanté* (Paris: Publibook, 2006). Critics in languages other than English have also paid more attention to Auster's involvement with cinema, as can be seen in Beate Hötger's *Identität im filmischen Werk von Paul Auster* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2002), Andreas Lienkamp, Wolfgang Merth and Christian Berkemeier's edition of *"As strange as the world": Annäherungen an das Werk des Erzählers und Filmemachers Paul Auster* (Münster: LIT, 2002) or Celestino Deleyto's *Smoke* (Barcelona: Paidós, 2000). Eduardo Urbina has collected his excellent articles on the relationship between Auster and Cervantes in *La ficción que no cesa: Paul Auster y Cervantes* (Vigo: Academia del Hispanismo, 2007).

[4] While *The Brooklyn Follies* is the odd-one-out in this trio, *Travels in the Scriptorium* and *Man in the Dark* are much more discernible as part of a "diptych", as Auster readily admits (Teodoro 2009).

CHAPTER ONE

LOSS, RUINS, WAR: PAUL AUSTER'S RESPONSE TO 9/11 AND THE "WAR ON TERROR"

PAOLO SIMONETTI

> I cannot deny that September 11, 2001, creates and requires a kind of silence. We desperately want to "explain" what happened. Explanation domesticates terror, making it part of "our" world. I believe attempts to explain must be resisted.
>
> —Stanley Hauerwas

Up to the present day, Paul Auster has never described the 9/11 attacks in any of his novels (except for a brief prolepsis in *The Brooklyn Follies*, to be mentioned later), though, of course, as an American and a New Yorker, he has been strongly affected by the event, both personally and professionally.[1] In a NPR interview held on September 8, 2002, he stated that, from his point of view as a storyteller, the most interesting response to 9/11 was people's need to cope with their own traumatic experiences by telling stories about the event (NPR 2002). It is safe to assume that he himself did share the same need.

Despite Auster's opinion that it might take a long time for the terrorist attacks to find an appropriate literary dimension ("Fiction is slow", he reminded the NPR interviewer, "fiction doesn't happen the next week"), in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 a number of renowned writers of different ages and backgrounds—such as Jonathan Safran Foer, Jay McInerney, Don DeLillo, and Ken Kalfus, to name but a few—have explicitly dealt with the attacks in their works. Nonetheless, apart from some notable exceptions,[2] even the most interesting of so called "9/11 novels" share an understated, quite submissive tone.[3] Perhaps Theodor Adorno's famous

(and often misunderstood) contention that "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno 1955, 31) applies to this more recent historical event as well. More likely, the reason behind such reserve lies in the fact that, as Auster acutely observed in the same interview, "some of the greatest art about a particular time is told obliquely" (NPR 2002).

Auster has indeed preferred to deal with the theme in oblique ways, adopting narrative techniques and intertextual strategies which made the attacks and their aftermath some of the text's main preoccupations without depicting them in a traditional way. Since 2001, Auster has published six novels and a screenplay: many contain (explicit or implicit) references to 9/11, and an attentive reader can easily understand how this event and its social and political reverberations play a crucial role in the plot and the structure of at least three of the novels: *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005), *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006), and *Man in the Dark* (2008).

The aim of this chapter is to investigate Auster's response to 9/11 and the subsequent "war on terror" as exemplified in these novels, which constitute a sort of trilogy about contemporary America. More generally, an analysis of Auster's most recent works would underscore the shift from a postmodernist sensibility to a new historical consciousness. According to Hayden White, the atrocities of Nazism and the concentration camps required just the high modernist style to be figured out in literature (White 1992). In a similar way, postmodernist fiction, characterized by self-reflexive inclinations from the Sixties to the Eighties, denied the consolation of good form and offered the fragmented plots and the schizophrenic language of a post-traumatic consciousness (Elias 2001). Now, in order to keep up with the media-saturated contemporary world, it seems that fiction has veered toward a new kind of realism, what James Wood contemptuously called "hysterical realism". Complaining that in recent "big, ambitious novels" such as Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997), or Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), "the conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, overworked", Wood declared that this mode of narration "seems to be almost incompatible with tragedy or anguish". Somehow missing the point, Wood faults this writing style because "it seems evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself" (Wood 2004, 179-80), failing to recognize the originality of a realism that, to quote Lance Olsen, "has moved through the blast furnace of postmodernity and come out on the other side, never able to be quite the same again" (Olsen 1990, 122).

Mimicking the language of television and media outlets, as well as the clusters of information endlessly connected in the World Wide Web, the

most interesting among present-day novels do not define historical representation by accuracy of depiction; on the contrary, the contemporary is caught up with past times through the use of anachronistic allusions and self-conscious malapropisms, intentional slips and absurd exaggerations, so that the traditional strategies of "mimesis" are strongly challenged. From this point of view, an analysis of Auster's works since 2005 is indicative of a paradigm shift, and sheds new light on this author's complex and original liaison with history.

Loss—Auster's goodbye to postmodernist fiction: *The Brooklyn Follies*

As some critics have remarked, Auster's complex relationship with postmodernist literature mainly focuses on a problematic equilibrium between metafiction and the narrative strategies traditionally associated with realism (Barone 1995, Weisenburger 1995, Herzogenrath 1999). It is particularly difficult to place Auster's earlier novels in a specific trend, because they belong to different genres, ranging from memoir (*The Invention of Solitude*, 1982) to metafiction (*The New York Trilogy*, 1987), from post-apocalyptic (*In the Country of Last Things*, 1987) through picaresque (*Moon Palace*, 1989), to magic realism (*Mr. Vertigo*, 1994). It seems that Auster's fiction—not to speak of his poetry—inhabits a Hawthornean "neutral territory", a purely subjective (quite autobiographical) dimension always conscious of the difficult negotiation with a historical reality that, though progressively bracketed by metafictional strategies, violently reclaims its actuality through recent traumatic events.

Unlike Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, "the mythic cousins of American postmodernism" (Cowart 2002, 7) to whom he is sometimes related, Auster considers himself a "realist" writer, and his works of fiction often include autobiographical elements and personal recollections. These are, nonetheless, as Dennis Barone writes, "kernels of reality buried in a text that everywhere seeks an effect of unreality", and their use becomes a parody "not of realism, but of irrealism" (Barone 1995, 6). "Realism" in Auster's works includes such irrational elements as chance, absurd coincidences, bizarre connections, secret relationships, "mirrors, twins, innumerable fathers and sons, reflections, ghosts, and eponyms" (Chénetier 1995, 38), and all other unlikely aspects of everyday life so dear to postmodernist writers, without nevertheless making Auster one of them. However, he cannot be easily related to the new generation of "post-postmodernism", as David Foster Wallace famously called "a certain subgenre of pop-conscious postmodern fiction, written mostly by young

Americans"—like Dave Eggers, Jonathan Safran Foer, Jonathan Lethem or Wallace himself—who attempt to "transfigure a world of and for appearance, mass appeal, and television", using "the transient received myths of popular culture as a *world* in which to imagine fictions about 'real,' albeit pop-mediated, characters" (Wallace 1997, 50). Surely there is continuity from Pynchon's analysis of history and its textual (paranoid) emplotment, through DeLillo's critique of the language of media and information dimming contemporary communications, to Auster's challenge to language *tout-court* as a means of interpretation and representation of experience. Yet the relation is not simply a derivative one.

The metafictional dimension of his works does not imply that Auster is not interested in history, and that his novels lack historical grounding; on the contrary, though in a 1996 interview he admitted that "historiography is a very murky subject", he confessed to be "a great reader of history", and that, especially during the writing of *Moon Palace*, he felt "compelled, again and again, to read and read and read and read more and more books about history" (Chénetier 1996, 29). He made clear that his interest in American past and present history dates back to the beginning of his career, and that *Moon Palace* is not his only "historical" novel:

> *City of Glass* is also about America. And certainly *Leviathan* and *Mr. Vertigo* are also about America. *The Music of Chance* may be less so on the surface, but that story, too, could only happen in America. (Chénetier 1996, 16)

Yet history in Auster's early novels is often "stylised", as Aliki Varvogli noted, "always subordinate to the artistic, aesthetic concerns of his texts" (Varvogli 2001, 117), a cardboard background behind the characters' actions and feelings rather than a character itself.

On a first reading, *The Brooklyn Follies* seems to conform to this trend, with its insistence on chance, coincidence, and human idiosyncrasy against the familiar background of Brooklyn. However, Auster specified in an interview that "the book had a very slow evolution" and that, though it was conceived before 9/11, it was written in its shadow, because the book "changed its shape as [he] wrote it and as the historical context changed" (ABC Radio National 2008). Through the novel's elaborate and complex plot, Auster managed to show how the promises and the good intentions glimpsed at the beginning of the new millennium "have been drowned in a whirlpool of suspicion and division" after the "collective amnesia" (Hellman 2006) derived from the dubious result of the 2000 elections, and then definitively annihilated by the New York attacks. Published after Bush's re-election in 2004 but set in the period of the contested elections

that first brought Bush to the White House following the fiasco of the Florida ballot, the novel deals with 9/11 in an oblique way, as a collective experience of imminent disaster unconsciously shared by the main characters as well as by the whole New York population. For this reason, according to David Hellman, it is "probably the first authentic attempt to deal with the post-Sept. 11 world", though the story ends just some minutes before the first plane hits the World Trade Center, and the attacks are mentioned only in the last lines, when the narrator states:

> It was eight o'clock when I stepped out onto the street, eight o'clock on the morning of September 11, 2001—just forty-six minutes before the first plane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Just two hours after that, the smoke of three thousand incinerated bodies would drift over toward Brooklyn and come pouring down on us in a white cloud of ashes and death. (Auster 2005, 303-04)

The 9/11 attacks literally close the novel, as well as, in Auster's own words, "a certain moment in our history" (La Clé des Langues 2009). Such an ending shapes the entire book as a sort of elegy of pre-9/11 America, the story of America's loss of innocence and the end of the nation's myth of invulnerability. Even the novel's first line, with the narrator just arrived in Brooklyn declaring to be "looking for some quiet place to die" (Auster 2005, 1), acquires a different significance, if one considers how 9/11's *memento mori* ominously looms just outside the narrative.

Significantly enough, Auster declared that only when he "found" the character of Nathan Glass—the first-person narrator of the story—he was able to "reconstruct the book", and began to conceive the novel as "a picture of life before 9/11", a "hymn to ordinary life" and to "all those little aches and pains of being alive" (La Clé des Langues 2009). When confronted with his duty as a writer in the face of a tragedy, Auster took upon himself "the onerous task of delivering up a literary balm to a wounded nation" (Hellman 2006) through the character of fifty-nine-year-old Nathan, who, at the beginning of the novel, convalescent from lung cancer, moves to Brooklyn in order to live the rest of his life in solitude and seclusion.

Though a retired insurance salesman, in the course of the novel Nathan reminds us of an old reclusive postmodernist writer—"You're a writer, Nathan", his nephew Tom tells him, "You're becoming a real writer" (Auster 2005, 147)—more similar to Thomas Pynchon or John Barth than to his own author, as a matter of fact. His acquaintances are on the same wavelength: his nephew Tom Glass is a failed-academic-turned-taxi-driver, convinced that his job gives him "a unique entry point into the

chaotic substructures of the universe" (Auster 2005, 29), while Tom's new employer, the book dealer Harry Brightman, is a belated Borges, whose dream as a child was "to publish an encyclopedia in which all the information was false. Wrong dates for every historical events, wrong locations for every river, biographies of people who never existed" (Auster 2005, 125). In order to occupy his time, Nathan himself begins to write down "in the simplest, clearest language possible an account of every blunder, every pratfall, every embarrassment, every idiocy, every foible, and every inane act" (Auster 2005, 5) ever committed by himself or other people. The process of research and annotation for his "Book of Human Folly" threatens to expand in a rhizomatic way—"I abandoned my one-box system", Nathan desperately declares, "in favor of a multi-box arrangement that allowed me to preserve my finished works in a more coherent fashion", (Auster 2005, 7)—and resembles the umpteenth postmodern pastiche:

> I called the project a book, but in fact it wasn't a book at all. Working with yellow legal pads, loose sheets of paper, the backs of envelopes and junk-mail form letters for credit cards and home-improvement loans, I was compiling what amounted to a collection of random jottings, a hodgepodge of unrelated anecdotes that I would throw into a cardboard box each time another story was finished. There was little method to my madness. Some of the pieces came to no more than a few lines, and a number of them, in particular the spoonerisms and malapropisms I was so fond of, were just a single phrase. (Auster 2005, 6)

Nevertheless, to write such a book is no longer possible, as Nathan understands when he admits: "Even though I did my best to keep the tone frivolous and light, I discovered that it wasn't always possible" (Auster 2005, 8). In a similar way, Auster could not write the comedy he had in mind when he first conceived *The Brooklyn Follies*.[4] The jokes and circumvolutions of chance—"Call them parallels, call them coincidences"—are considered by Tom mere "external facts", and so "less important than the inner truth of each man's life" (Auster 2005, 15-16). It is difficult (and politically incorrect) to find bizarre links or make witty jokes in the face of events as tragic as the New York attacks, and even postmodernist writers feel less and less compelled to humour or clever linguistic plays while addressing recent history.

In 1990 Lance Olsen had already observed how "postmodernism has turned its sense of joking against itself and against its readers—the final centers of authority in this century", until "as we move into the last decade of our century, both postmodernism and the comic vision have once again

been marginalized by our neoconservative culture" (Olsen 1990, 35). In the empty space left by the destruction of the towers, even postmodernist writers discovered themselves as realist writers[5] and felt the moral imperative of producing counternarratives to face the terroristic discourse of violence and fear (as devised by terrorists and politicians alike). In this regard Tom, while playing with the meaning of their surnames, ironically reminds his uncle that "we've entered a new era, Nathan. The post-family, post-student, post-past age of Glass and Wood. … The *now*. And also the *later*. But no more dwelling on the *then*" (Auster 2005, 22). Auster makes thus clear that the new millennium requires an original approach to history and temporality, different from the witty linguistic plays of postmodernism, and in his most recent novels he tries to negotiate a new relationship between history and fiction.

At the end of *The Brooklyn Follies*, after having experienced the ups and downs of everyday life and having relinquished his initial solipsism, Nathan's literary project utterly changes when a sudden thought hits him: "Most lives vanish. A person dies, and little by little all traces of that life disappear", leaving only "a few objects, a few documents, and a smattering of impressions made on other people" (Auster 2005, 301). When Nathan is unexpectedly hospitalized for an alleged heart attack, forced to face the mourning of loss and the ineluctable actuality of death, he turns toward other people, their feelings suddenly more important than any bizarre encyclopedia he may long to write:

> My idea was this: to form a company that would publish books about the forgotten ones, to rescue the stories and facts and documents before they disappeared—and shape them into a contiguous narrative, the narrative of a life. (Auster 2005, 301)

As a bitter irony, this new project—which Nathan foolishly reputes "the single most important idea [he] had ever had" (Auster 2005, 300)—is probably doomed to failure as well, because, forty-six minutes after he leaves the hospital "feverishly planning the structure of [his] new company", the sky, until then "the bluest of pure deep blue" (Auster 2005, 303), would be full of the smoke coming from the crashed planes and the flaming towers. Yet, Nathan's project was apparently fulfilled, in the real world, by *The New York Times*. In the aftermath of 9/11, the newspaper published as a daily feature the so-called "Portraits of Grief": brief biographies of the victims that in few lines and sensationalistic titles related some generic facts of their lives. Auster himself confessed in an interview his interest in these profiles:

> One felt, looking at those pages every day, that real lives were jumping out at you. We weren't mourning an anonymous mass of people, we were mourning thousands of individuals. And the more we knew about them, the more we could wrestle with our own grief. (Scott 2001)

However, as the author showed in his novel, a return to an ingenuous old-style realism is not a valid alternative to the metafictional exaggerations of postmodernist literature, neither is it an effective way to cope with trauma.

What chances remain, then, for literature to endure after 9/11 (and after postmodernism as well)? A partial answer may be found in an anecdote Tom recounts to Nathan during a car trip, regarding one of the precursors of postmodernist fiction, Franz Kafka. In order to comfort a little girl who had lost her doll, Kafka wrote her a number of letters pretending they were from the doll, informing the girl of its life far from home, and ultimately bidding her goodbye. It is important that Kafka writes the letters with "the same seriousness and tension he displays when composing his own work":

> He isn't about to cheat the little girl. This is a real literary labor, and he's determined to get it right. If he can come up with a beautiful and persuasive lie, it will supplant the girl's loss with a different reality—a false one, maybe, but something true and believable according to the laws of fiction. (Auster 2005, 154)

Of course, literature may have a therapeutic function, as testified by Auster's novel and all 9/11 fiction (not to mention the recent studies of "Medical Humanities" and narrative medicine in particular), but it has to be taken seriously; "when a person is lucky enough to live inside a story, to live inside an imaginary world", says Tom, "the pains of this world disappear" (Auster 2005, 155). Reductionist as this view of literature may seem, "there's a message in it for us", as Tom reflects, "some kind of warning about how we're supposed to act" (Auster 2005, 153).

Ruins—Writing "Ground Zero": *Travels in the Scriptorium*

Critics have largely dismissed *Travels in the Scriptorium* as a belated (and largely failed) metafictional puzzle "swallowing its own tail until there is nothing left" (Zipp 2007), "self-regarding almost to the point of narcissism" (Royle 2006), and on the whole representing "a backward step from Auster's last novel" (Hickling 2006). Yet, Auster considers this work as constituting a "diptych" (Teodoro 2009) with his following novel, *Man in the Dark*, in which the American contemporary political situation

is explicitly criticized, and this makes it worthy of a closer scrutiny. In depicting an amnesiac old man trapped in a room, spied on by hidden cameras and microphones, ridden by guilt and unsure about what he has forced his "operatives" to do, the novel reflects the paranoid mood and the confused feelings of American people towards the government's responsibilities for the 9/11 attacks and the "war on terror". Mr. Blank, the rather mysterious main character, "has no idea that a camera is planted in the ceiling directly above him" (Auster 2006, 1), neither is he aware of his whereabouts. "What he knows", says the narrator, "is that his heart is filled with an implacable sense of guilt. At the same time, he can't escape the feeling that he is the victim of a terrible injustice" (Auster 2006, 2-3), just like the average American citizen after 9/11.

In a way, the novel begins where *The Brooklyn Follies* ended, with an old man recovering from some disease, oppressed by old age as well as by a number of questions. The hospitalized Nathan had felt a very similar sense of oppression toward the end of the previous book:

> [L]ying in that boxed-in enclosure with the beeping machines and the wires clamped to my skin was the closest I have come to being nowhere, to being inside myself and outside myself at the same time. … To be diminished in such a way is to lose all right to privacy. (Auster 2005, 297)

At the beginning of *Travels in the Scriptorium* Mr. Blank is sitting on a bed, "palms spread out on his knees, head down, staring at the floor", while "[h]is mind is elsewhere, stranded among the figments in his head as he searches for an answer to the question that haunts him" (Auster 2006, 1). He has at his disposal only a series of pictures, though the narrator distrusts what Mr. Blank sees, observing that "[t]he pictures do not lie, but neither do they tell the whole story" (Auster 2006, 3). Auster himself has always been suspicious of the "truth" of history and its representations, as he reflected in an interview:

> Most of our contemporary history comes out of newspapers, people recording what happens; and they *always* get it wrong. It happens so consistently, that you learn that everything you read in the newspaper is wrong—even though the journalist is trying his best, is not purposely distorting the facts. (Chénetier 1996, 29)

Right after that, he quoted the most (mis)represented event in American history, the Kennedy assassination, and refuted the widespread myth of a nation suddenly "stunned", where "everybody was grieving and there

wasn't a dry eye in the nation". The record of his travel to Washington to attend the funerals is particularly revealing:

> A large number of the people there were only interested in getting good photographs. There were people climbing up into trees and yelling at each other about how to get the right angle. There was no sadness or bereavement that I could see. Just people out there in a kind of carnival atmosphere. (Chénetier 1996, 30)

Auster's anecdote exposes the origins of present-day obsession for media reproduction that obliterates any historical event in the precise moment when it happens. The Kennedy assassination represented "the shock of a communicational explosion", as Fredric Jameson described it, "a unique collective (and media, communicational) experience, which trained people to read such events in a new way" (Jameson 1991, 306, 355), and which, "by accidentally drawing attention to the lack of coherence and coordination in the plot of history" (Knight 2000, 114), inaugurated the new paradigm of paranoia in American fiction (Knight 2000, Simonetti 2009). From then on, every historical occurrence is already filtered, prefabricated, edited and ready for the market the very moment it happens, while at the same time it remains inevitably opaque and inaccessible to the public.

9/11 is one of such occurrences: quite everything we know about it comes from newspapers, reportages and interviews, though millions of people experienced it personally or in front of a TV set, listened to "true" reports from witnesses and survivors and read "true" relations from governmental authorities and experts. Yet many people still contend that all we know about it might be a lie, or, worse, a kind of governmental propaganda, as Auster himself has recently declared:

> Under the new Bush administration, one truly feels that the media is functioning as a kind of propaganda machine for the government. ... [O]ther organs of the media are just blatantly pandering to the public, giving them what they think the public wants, entertaining war coverage on cable TV. It's become impossible for me to look at that stuff anymore—it seems so tainted and biased and twisted. (Reed 2003)

In this regard, Auster's insistence on feigning absolute objectivity while relating the facts happening in the novel (which is presented as an objective report based on data gathered with highly reliable instruments) acquires different, ominous meanings:

> It should be noted that in addition to the camera a microphone is embedded in one of the walls, and every sound Mr. Blank makes is being reproduced and preserved by a highly sensitive digital tape recorder. ...
>
> It should be noted that a second camera and a second tape recorder have been planted in the bathroom ceiling, making it possible for all activities in that space to be recorded as well, and because the word all is an absolute term, the transcription of the dialogue between Anna and Mr. Blank can be verified in every one of its details. (Auster 2006, 8, 26)

Of course, nobody can verify such details in a work of fiction, and Auster's irony is stressed by the fact that some of the characters refer to obviously fictitious novels (some of them written by Auster himself) as "reports", recalling in some way the infamous *9/11 Commission Report* and the language used by the Bush government to legitimize military operations. As Martin Butler and Jens Martin Gurr argued, the novel "critically engages with a particular genre which, especially in a US context, has been controversially debated in recent years", and in reading *Travels in the Scriptorium* "one may only think of the reports allegedly proving the existence of weapons of mass destructions in Iraq and thus legitimizing the replacement of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship" (Butler and Gurr 2008, 199).

The story gets complicated when the secluded Mr. Blank begins to read a story set in an alternate world by one Trause (anagram of the author and protagonist of another Auster's novel, *Oracle Night*) about one Sigmund Graf, who, while prisoner in a cell with "the desert begin[ning] just outside [the] window" (Auster 2006, 10) and subject to numerous beatings by "the Colonel", writes a report of his (obviously failed) mission; as a loyal operative for the mighty "Confederation", he has been sent in "the Alien Territories" in order to investigate the suspicious activity of an alleged traitor, notably called "Land", accused of stirring unrest among the natives. The history of the troubled Territories, originally inhabited by "the Primitives", traces that of the American conquest:

> Everything used to be theirs. Then the ships arrived, bringing settlers from Iberia and Gaul, from Albion, Germania, and the Tartar kingdoms, and little by little the Primitives were pushed off their lands. We slaughtered them and enslaved them and then we herded them together in the parched and barren territories beyond the western provinces. (Auster 2006, 75-76)

While reading the book, Mr. Blank, so far "reasonably certain that the present moment can be situated sometime in the early twenty-first century

and that he lives in a country called the United States of America" (Auster 2006, 12), begins to doubt whether he is still there, while on the contrary the reader gradually understands that Auster is actually commenting on "contemporary America, the 'war on terror,' and prison camps in Guantanamo, Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere" (Butler and Gurr 2008, 198). Yet, as soon as Mr. Blank becomes acquainted with the story he is reading and considers it true, because "it sounds more like a report, something that really happened", he is contradicted again by another character, who tells him that "it's make-believe, … [a] work of fiction" (Auster 2006, 78).

This is the very reason why Auster structures his novel as a mock-postmodernist romp, willingly exaggerating its metafictional dimension; by stripping language to the bone while reflecting on contemporary issues, Auster makes clear that the recent national events and the political responses to them have brought not only America, but also narrative itself to a sort of "Ground Zero". The story about the Confederation is, by Auster's words, "a weird political parable" (Owens, 2007); Mr. Blank, like his author, does not accept the situation it represents, and eventually he has the opportunity to change it. When the manuscript he is reading abruptly interrupts, he feels angry and frustrated:

> Mr. Blank tosses the typescript onto the desk, snorting with dissatisfaction and contempt, furious that he has been compelled to read a story that has no ending, an unfinished work that has barely even begun, a mere bloody fragment. What garbage, he says out loud ... regretting having wasted so much time on that misbegotten excuse of a story. (Auster 2006, 84)

Not a lover of postmodernist literature, definitely. "[W]here I come from", he adds, "stories are supposed to have a beginning, a middle, and an end", suggesting that the "bastard" author "should be taken outside and shot" (Auster 2006, 88). In *The Brooklyn Follies*, Nathan realized that in the face of tragedy he could no longer write his witty "Book of Human Follies", or any naïve biography of dead people. The (postmodernist) writer (as well as any reader trained on postmodernist assumptions) is trapped in his self-constructed works of fantasy and is violently forced by events to negotiate a new relationship between words and objects, facts and fiction, subjectivity and history.

Mr. Blank goes one step further. When he is asked to continue the story he is reading, "as an exercise in imaginative reasoning" (Auster 2006, 89), he finally utters what the reader at this point has already understood: