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WINTER JOURNAL: THE CHRONICLES OF AN
AUTHOR AND HIS CHARACTERS' AGEING
FORETOLD

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PROFESSEUR AGRÉGÉ AT THE SERVICE DES LANGUES OF
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DOCTOR IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Ever since the publication of *The Invention of Solitude* in 1982 up until that of *Winter Journal* in 2012, Paul Auster, the prolific contemporary New York writer, has evoked, in his autobiographical and autofictional work, the life stories of several of his characters who grow old simultaneously with the author himself. It is in two of his most recent novels that the theme of old age is specifically addressed. *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006) and *Man in the Dark* (2008) both evoke the physical and mental decline that two ageing characters suffer from. Both are writers approaching the end of their lives. These two novels form a diptych: the first happens in one day, the second, in one night.

The main character in *Travels in the Scriptorium*, Mr. Blank, is condemned by his condition as an “old man” to inaction and the impossibility of finding any form of coherent thought. Handicapped by old age and illness, he has serious problems of physical mobility. Moreover, he suffers from a form of senile dementia which leads him to forget his own identity. As he suffers enormously from this situation, he seeks refuge by withdrawing within himself, into a “locked room”, a recurrent theme in Paul Auster's works.

The hero of *Man in the Dark*, August Brill, is also a prisoner within a “locked room” following an accident which has deprived him of the usage of his legs. Widowed, grieving and wounded by life, he must find refuge within his imagination in order to resist falling into the abyss of memories from his bygone life.

These two characters do not however intend to suffer passively the effects of their disabilities and decide to work diligently on their mind and imagination in the hope of improving their overall state. It is this paradox represented by their situation that will be studied in this article, a paradox

born from the surprising contrast between, on the one hand, the physical and mental incapacity caused by old age and, on the other hand, the positive effects of work undertaken on the mind and imagination which allows these disabled characters to obtain a surprising and quite unexpected mental virtuosity.

1) The representation of progressive ageing which leads to illness and death

a) Characters who age at the same time as their author

In Paul Auster's works, the narrating characters are submitted, just like the author himself, to the natural process of ageing from one novel to the next. His first prose work, *The Invention of Solitude*, sets the tone by introducing an autobiographical summary of the life of the author, then aged 35. In mourning for his recently deceased father, the author chooses to describe exactly how he feels. This first prose work, devoted to the sudden unexpected death of his father, will have an influence on all his following work. The narrators of the novels which come after *The Invention of Solitude* often share the same date of birth as the author: 1947. Marco Stanley Fogg, the narrator of *Moon Palace*, explains on the very first page of the novel that he was 18 in 1965. As François Gavillon notes in *Paul Auster, Gravité et légèreté de l'écriture*¹, a few temporal clues allow us to determine that 1947 is also Aaron's date of birth, making him the same age as Fogg and their common author². Peter Aaron, whose initials recall Paul Auster's, is the narrator of *Leviathan*. David Zimmer in *The Book of Illusions* states his age as fifty-one at the moment when he writes his final manuscript, in January 1999³, that is to say approximately the same age as the author when he published his novel in 2002. In *Oracle Night*, Sidney Orr is introduced as a thirty-four year old man that a serious illness has transformed into an old man (“I was only thirty-four, but for all intents and purposes the illness had turned me into an old man”, 1).

¹ François Gavillon, *Paul Auster, Gravité et légèreté de l'écriture*. Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2000.

² Translated from French: “Quelques indices temporels permettent de fixer à 1947 l'année de naissance de Aaron, qui a donc le même âge que Fogg et que leur auteur commun” (172)

³ “I turned fifty-one in March 1998. [...] They sent me home from the hospital in mid-December, and by early January I was writing the first pages of this book” (*The Book of Illusions*, 317-318)

However, since the story is told twenty years after this event (the footnote on page 1 states: "Twenty years have elapsed since that morning", 8), it seems that Sidney is fifty-four at the time of narration, which corresponds to Auster's age at the time his novel was published in 2003. As for John Trause, yet another writer-character in *Oracle Night*, and whose name "Trause" is an anagram of Auster's name, he is fifty-six when he dies ("[M]y friend was dead at fifty-six", 206), which is precisely the age of Paul Auster when he was writing *Oracle Night*. *The Brooklyn Follies*, published in 2005, features a narrator whose age is yet again close to Paul Auster's: "I hadn't been back [to Brooklyn] in fifty-six years [...]. My parents had moved out of the city when I was three" (1). Nathan Glass is thus fifty-nine, that is to say "almost sixty years old" (3), as he confirms two pages later.

Nathalie Cochoy observes that this game is less autobiographical than revealing of the way in which writing is oriented towards life⁴. Auster's characters age at the same time as their author who chooses again and again to represent characters whose age is more or less the same as his. Now that this had been established, let us observe how this ageing process is not without its consequences.

b) Staging of old age and illness

From the third page of *Travels in the Scriptorium*, the narrator states that the adjective "old" applies to any person whose age is between sixty and a hundred years old⁵.

This new and difficult stage in life is often accompanied by illness which imposes extra hardship with its harmful effects. Indeed, old age and illness are often associated in Paul Auster's works. Another distressing observation is that his ageing and ailing characters realise that their illness is progressing at the same time as their age. In some instances, it is their very illness which, by imposing itself forcefully, transforms a healthy young man into a prematurely aged person.

The leitmotiv of illness appears in *The Book of Illusions* (2002) in the shape of the sudden brutal onset of disease with no forewarning: a heart attack. This theme recurs often in Paul Auster's novels, as a reminder of

⁴ Translated from French: "[c]e jeu est moins autobiographique que révélateur de la manière dont l'écriture s'oriente vers la vie". Nathalie Cochoy, *Passante à New York*. Bordeaux : Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2009. Page 194.

⁵ "the word old is a flexible term and can be used to describe a person anywhere between sixty and a hundred" (*Travels in the Scriptorium*, 3)

his father's death because of a heart attack before he had even entered old age: "One day there is life. A man, for example, in the best of health, not even old, with no history of illness. [...] And then, suddenly, it happens there is death. A man lets out a little sigh, he slumps down in his chair, and it is death. [...] Death without warning. Which is to say: life stops. And it can stop at any moment" (*The Invention of Solitude*, 5). David Zimmer in *The Book of Illusions*, Joyce's husband, Stanley's wife and Nathan's symptoms⁶ in *The Brooklyn Follies*, Ed Victory's second wife and Ed Victory himself in *Oracle Night* are all examples of characters who succumb to heart attacks.

Other illnesses affect the narrator characters in Paul Auster's works: Sidney Orr transforms into an old man prematurely when he is thirty-four in *Oracle Night*. He no longer knows who he is and can hardly walk. In the same novel, John Trause, aged fifty-six, dies of a pulmonary embolism. In *The Brooklyn Follies*, Nathan Glass is in remission from cancer after having nearly died.

Travels in the Scriptorium and *Man in the Dark* stand out from the previous novels however in that they introduce characters who, contrary to those that we have mentioned up until now, are older than sixty years old and suffer from a handicap linked to actual old age.

In *Travels in the Scriptorium*, the situation which is introduced in the very first paragraphs presents an "old man" who has forgotten who he is and does not know where he is. As he tries to recollect this information, he is faced with the traumatic experience of trying to reactivate his memory, but discovering that his efforts are all in vain and that he is incapable of answering the most elementary questions. We are given very little initial information concerning this character. His physical description is very vague: "the old man's age, for example, is difficult to determine from the slightly out-of-focus black-and-white images. The only fact that can be set down with any certainty is that he is not young" (2-3). His very name is unknown and it is decided that he will be called by a name which symbolises his absence of identity: "Mr. Blank". He is Mr. Nothing, nothingness, the blank page of the author who lacks inspiration. The French translation of the novel indicates in a footnote that "Blank signifies white, like a white page, or empty, like a blank look, an empty box on a

⁶ This traumatic experience is directly inspired by a real misadventure of Paul Auster's who was the victim of an inflamed oesophagus, the symptoms of which are very similar to those of a heart attack, and hence thought that he was about to die, just like Nathan Glass in *The Brooklyn Follies* (Cf. *Winter Journal* : "your false heart attack", 31-32).

questionnaire”⁷. In the absence of memory, the only clues available to Mr. Blank are visual and emotional. He does not know where he is or for how long he has been there, but he is suffering from a deep feeling of guilt. His solipsism is thus absolute at the beginning of this novel and old age and illness unite in order to erase his identity and disrupt his physical and mental capacities.

Man in the Dark presents a similar situation: the narrator never leaves the enclosed space inside his home which he considers as a rampart against the exterior world. Leaving this safe space would be extremely difficult for him anyway since pain in one of his legs (which he refers to as “my shattered leg”, 44) because of a car accident forces him to stay confined to bed in his bedroom:

I would love to be able to walk up the stairs, to go to her room, and talk to her for a while. [...] But I can't climb the stairs in a wheelchair, can I? And if I used my crutch, I would probably fall in the dark. Damn this idiot leg. The only solution is to sprout a pair of wings, giant wings of the softest white down. Then I'd be up there in a flash. (12-13)

At the age of 72, the narrator would like to be master of his own body but he knows that it is now but an unrealisable dream. Moreover, he suffers from other aches and pains, in particular a cough—which never ceases to punctuate his narrative—caused by his life as a smoker. On a psychological level, he is subject to the regular resurgence of memories from his past life as well as the obsessive memory of the recent death of his wife. His memory, which is particularly active during his nights of insomnia, however fails to function properly when it is needed for the most simple everyday events: “Odd that those figures should have stuck, but with so many other things slipping away from me now” (81).

As these narrating characters grow older, their preoccupations turn naturally towards problems linked to old age and death, even more so since, as we have seen, old age is linked to illness in Paul Auster's works. Starting with *The Book of Illusions* (2002), and in particular in *Travels in the Scriptorium* and *Man in the Dark*, the characters suffer from serious illnesses which deprive them of their mobility, rendering them dependent and forcing them to live as recluses. It is in this sinister context that the Austerian “locked room” is put in place. A place of reclusion, solitude, despair, but also a place of convalescence and rebirth, the “locked room”

⁷ Translated from the French: “Blank signifie blanc, comme une page blanche, ou vide, comme un regard vide, une case vide dans un questionnaire” (11)

plays an ambiguous role in *Travels in the Scriptorium* and in *Man in the Dark*.

2) The Austerian locked room: a place of despair and of rebirth

a) Duality of solitude within the locked room

Solitude occupies an important place in Paul Auster's works as attests the very title of his first prose work, *The Invention of Solitude*. This theme of solitude leads to various and often opposed interpretations, in particular in French where the term can be used in two different ways, as opposed to the English language which offers the choice between "solitude" and "loneliness"⁸. However, the connotations of these two words vary a lot depending on the individual author. Paul Auster chooses the word "solitude" following the example of an author he often evokes, Henry David Thoreau, who presents the choice of solitude as a vital need: "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers" (*Walden*, 135).

Ever since *The Invention of Solitude*, the notion of solitude is analysed thoroughly in the light of Paul Auster's reading and personal experience. In his first novel, we encounter two forms of solitude which will often reappear in Auster's works: the negative experience of a harmful form of solitude, that of the father who lives isolated from the world, without experiencing any benefit from his isolation, and, on the other hand, the positive experience of an auto-imposed solitude, that of the son, which allows the character to open himself up to literary creation. Throughout *The Invention of Solitude*, Auster never ceases to oppose the prison cell type room where consciousness explodes and the place of creation it can become once such a space has been "colonised". "All the unhappiness of man stems from one thing only: that he is incapable of staying quietly in his room"⁹: as Pascal suggests, it is the individual himself who chooses to

⁸ The theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich explains well both aspects of solitude, whose most common definition tends to not mention its positive aspects: "Our language has wisely sensed these two sides of man's being alone. It has created the word 'loneliness' to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word 'solitude' to express the glory of being alone. Although, in daily life, we do not always distinguish these words, we should do so consistently and thus deepen our understanding of our human predicament" (*The Eternal Now*, chapter 1, II).

abandon himself to a sterile and harmful solitude, or to use this solitude as a step towards creation.

“The Locked Room”, which is the title of one of the three stories within *The New York Trilogy*, is the space which certain characters choose to isolate themselves from the exterior world in order to exclude themselves from society so as to focus on themselves. By locking himself in this enclosed space with the aim of finding a lost intimacy between mind and body, the hero must abandon all his spatiotemporal landmarks, leave the “here and now” and lose himself in the enclosed space, explains Dominique Coquet¹⁰. Mind and body merge in order to form but one big space of memory: “Memory as a room, as a body, as a skull that encloses the room in which a body sits” (*The Invention of Solitude*, 93). The “locked room” allows the character to delve within himself for better or for worse.

The locked room thus appears like a space of quiet solitude, like that of some of Vermeer's paintings, evoked by Paul Auster in *The Invention of Solitude*, which represent a woman in a room, alone with her solitude and her everyday gestures. *Travels in the Scriptorium* presents from the very beginning, in the manner of the Dutch painter, an old man sitting on the edge of his bed, with his head down staring at the floor, the image of a solitude which is impossible to decode in the first few lines of the novel. But the locked room can also be a paradoxical space in which the calm of a desired solitude and the horror inspired by imprisonment alternate, not unlike Van Gogh's *Bedroom in Arles* (1888): calm and relaxing at first, the painting awakens, according to Paul Auster, a sensation of imprisonment in a room without an exit. Finally, the locked room can also be a place of madness, like Hölderlin's tower. Fortunately, the comment made by Paul Auster in his first prose work about this third aspect of the “locked room” symbolised by the tower is not as negative as it seems: Auster doesn't focus so much on the sinister and desperate aspect of such a situation as that of Hölderlin's but considers, on the contrary, that the poet's imprisonment is, in a way, what saved him: “More than likely, it is the room that restored Hölderlin to life, that gave him back whatever life it

⁹ “[T]out le malheur des hommes vient d'une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos dans une chambre”. Quoted in English by Paul Auster in *The Invention of Solitude*, page 80.

¹⁰ Translated from French: “le héros doit abandonner ses repères spatio-temporels, décrocher du “ici et maintenant”, et se perdre dans l'espace”. Dominique Coquet, *Identité de l'écriture et écriture de l'identité dans the New York Trilogy de Paul Auster*. Thèse de doctorat sous la direction de Sylviane Burner, soutenue le 9 décembre 2005 à l'Université Paul Verlaine, Metz. Page 58.

was left for him to live” (106). It is a similar situation for Jonas, swallowed by the whale, who finds refuge within its stomach. Following this interpretation, it is possible to consider that Mr. Blank, by being subjected to this stay in the “locked room” will find his salvation rather than his perdition.

We will now study the way in which Mr. Blank and August Brill who both first have to endure the effects of a harmful solitude, the outcome of which can be nothing but death, manage to turn their ordeal into a positive experience which initiates a true rebirth and leads the characters onto the path of literary creation.

b) A place of imprisonment and despair

A large part of *Travels in the Scriptorium* is dedicated to an interactive relationship between Mr. Blank and the locked room. The importance of the setting of this novel is indicated from the third paragraph onwards. The space in which Mr. Blank finds himself resembles in all aspects the other Austerian “locked rooms” which we find frequently in his works and it possesses its usual characteristics: it is small and bare. However, as opposed to the other Austerian characters who have had to spend a period of time confined in such a room, Mr. Blank wonders throughout the novel why he is imprisoned there: is he detained there against his will or is he free to leave his room whenever he wishes to do so? This uncertainty plays an important role since Mr. Blank interprets his misadventure differently depending on whether he believes himself to be imprisoned or whether he thinks he is free to leave whenever he wants to. The ambiguity of this situation is maintained permanently because he will never manage to know the truth. In fact, he has no reason to leave his room since his physical state forces him to rest and to be dependent on others: he is no longer in control of his movements, he is prone to shaking, can hardly stand up, eat or wash himself without the help of a nurse. The ambiguity may remain regarding his status within the locked room, but what is clear is that he is imprisoned within his own defective body and lost mind. His situation is even more serious in that to his sense of being lost is added an impression of not being able to escape from his fate because of his great age. Such a character, with his old age and his helplessness and confusion, could be interpreted as a phantasmagorical projection of the ageing author, trapped by his failing body and wandering mind with no hope of being able to escape.

The setting, as we have seen, plays an important role and the first paragraphs of the novel immerse us immediately in a Beckettian

atmosphere of emptiness: the old man is in the middle of a nearly empty room which contains merely a bed, a desk, a chair and a lamp. This room reminds us of the one in which "Dr. B." is imprisoned in *Royal Game* (*Schachnovelle*) by Stefan Zweig.

The arrangement of the furniture in the room as well as the relationship between the character and each object are of utmost importance throughout *Travels in the Scriptorium*. It is not a matter of chance if the first object mentioned is the bed on which Mr. Blank is sitting. A symbol of rest but also of illness and convalescence, such a piece of furniture plays a crucial role in the endless loop at the end of the novel which shows Mr. Blank lying down in his bed whilst the lights are switched off and a voice can be heard saying—and this will be the last sentence of the novel—: "Sleep well, Mr. Blank. Lights out" (130). Hence, everything starts on this bed and everything finishes there: we have come full circle, the end of the novel comes back to the very first scene in a vicious circle which is just as oppressing as the atmosphere of the room from which Mr. Blank will never escape.

The other piece of furniture, the desk, a symbol of creativity in most Austerian novels, takes here a different form. Indeed, in Auster's works, narration goes through the act of writing, a true ritual which is dutifully staged in each novel, showing the writer at his desk. It is at this Austerian desk that narration, which is usually in the first person, is written. Yet the desk cannot play the same role in *Travels in the Scriptorium* as in Auster's previous novels since this story is told in the third person. Mr. Blank is not the narrating character and it is thus not he who is telling and writing the story that the reader is reading. Hence, we must ask ourselves what the signification of this desk, which, for the first time in an Austerian work, is not used for the act of writing, is. In fact, it seems that this item of furniture is but an empty shell, the reminder of a past life as a writer, just as Mr. Blank is no longer more than the empty shell of a man who, from what the other characters have led him to believe, was once a prolific writer. The state of illness in which Mr. Blank finds himself does not allow him to use this desk to write and this symbolic piece of furniture seems to only be present as a representation of the character's past which seems, at first sight, definitely bygone.

The other novel which is the object of our study, *Man in the Dark*, introduces a character, August Brill, who is in what seems to be a desperate situation: he is an old man who is trapped in bed because of an injury to one of his legs. Mourning and guilt-ridden with remorse because of his past mistakes, he can no longer sleep at night. From the second page of the novel, he explains that he is trying to forget his sad situation by

“telling himself stories” at night, when insomnia torments him. It is this form of escape, which he practises by appealing to his imagination, which will allow this character, who is bed-ridden because of his illness, to live, in parallel to his reclusive life, the adventures of a character emanating from his imagination, who takes part in a civil war and finds himself at the heart of the action. The enclosed space and the exterior world are thus opposed but join together through the first narration which generates the second in a vertical hierarchy allowing us to see the relationship between the two spaces, one interior and the other exterior.

Just like August Brill in *Man in the Dark*, Mr. Blank will manage to escape from the space in which he is trapped thanks to the work on his imagination.

c) A place of rebirth through the work of the mind

The few objects which are present in the “locked room” will play an important role in the recovery, by the character, of his memory, his identity and his physical and mental capacities, all the more so since there is not one instance when he is not using one of them.

As we have seen, one of the items of furniture which is contained in the room is the famous desk of the writer which reappears in each Austerian novel. If it is here rendered unusable as the place of writing because of Mr. Blank's physical state, it still plays an important role since upon it are placed some objects which function as clues which will help Mr. Blank to reactivate his memory and remember certain people he has met in his past life. Mr. Blank thus finds on this desk thirty-six photos which will allow him to associate faces with names which are given to him, reminding us of the research done by Paul Auster in *The Invention of Solitude* in order to find members of his own family.

Other objects are also on the desk: a notebook in which Mr. Blank starts taking notes throughout the day, writing down the names of characters as and when he hears them. This quite rudimentary note-taking constitutes a first step towards the reappropriation of memory. Next to the notebook are four piles of paper. The one Mr. Blank gives the most importance to in the course of the story is a manuscript which seems to have been written by a prisoner of war waiting for the moment of his execution. After having read a few paragraphs, Mr. Blank cannot determine whether it is a work of fiction or an authentic report, a true testimony. A quick stylistic analysis convinces him that it is a text that was written in the 19th century and which offers the peculiarity of being unfinished, which greatly annoys Mr. Blank. One of the characters who is

following Mr. Blank's progress, a certain Dr. Fanshawe, asks him to invent the rest and we thus witness this work of creation until the end of the novel.

And that is how, thanks to this exercise in writing, Mr. Blank rediscovers little by little his memory as well as his identity as a writer. Story-writing allows him to control time and thus to restructure life. Indeed, being able to once again distinguish between past, present and future allows him to give meaning to life. Writing—or at least the process of structuring a story, since in this instance Mr. Blank does not write but works in the manner of a writer—as we can see, plays an essential role in this process of reconstruction by allowing the character to regain the power of awakening his memory and thus to reconquer his mind and body which recover their capacities.

In *Travels in the Scriptorium*, the objects are connecting-documents which become identity clues allowing Mr. Blank to reappropriate his lost memory, in the same way that in *The Invention of Solitude* photos and abandoned objects belonging to Auster's father helped the writer to reconstruct his identity as a lone man and to fit into his family by rediscovering a story which had many links with that of other members of that family and which gave it all meaning. As Auster says in *The Invention of Solitude*: “[T]he moment we step into the space of memory, we walk into the world” (178). Like a child who invents a world in order to play, the old man rebuilds his world with the help of his imagination which enables him to find a new youth.

The stay in the locked room can thus have a double effect. The first is to condemn the person who is in there to a definite mortiferous and sterile imprisonment. The second is to allow the rebirth of the individual since well-managed isolation can take on a positive aspect, trigger a rediscovery of one's self and render the individual available for creative activity. As Pascal Bruckner observes:

For Auster, confinement is a form of exile. [...] This penchant for narrow spaces, where the spirit can project itself against the walls [...] makes the room a kind of mental uterus, site of a second birth. In this enclosure the subject gives birth, in essence, to himself. From mere biological existence he now attains spiritual life. [...] The self must die, Auster seems to say, in order to live [...]. (28)

It is in such an instance that the locked room as a physical space merges with the locked room as the mental space of the character. It truly

becomes a uterus, a place of rebirth. This is an image which reappears in *The Brooklyn Follies* when Tom Wood's very small flat is described: "the womblike dark of his tiny home" (131). In this space resolutely situated "outside the world", death and rebirth merge into one as Wood's room is also compared to a coffin ("the dismal coffin he called his room", 132). Indeed, rebirth can only happen after the death of the self: "The self must die [...] in order to live". In order for this double operation of death and rebirth to take place, the locked room must belong to another dimension and form a private, timeless space, a space of absolute solipsism in which the Austerian character, or Auster himself, finds himself face to face with himself. Others can no longer see him. He disappears, in a sense, from the world.

The locked room does not really belong to life itself but to its very beginning and its end ("womblike", "coffin"). The rebirth of the characters who seek refuge within this interior space happens symbolically in the other novels during nine months and it is of utmost significance that this rebirth takes the same amount of time as the gestation period leading to birth. The comparison to the womb thus takes on its full meaning: it is at the end of the gestation period that the Austerian narrator "gives birth" to the work which he began nine months before, and leaves his place of confinement, ready to rediscover life from a different angle. As a place of foetal "regression", the locked room allows the Austerian characters to experience a true rebirth.

The end of *Travels in the Scriptorium* and *Man in the Dark* is not as optimistic as that of Auster's other novels since we witness an uninterrupted succession of days of reclusion in the former and that the latter presents an elderly insomniac who continues to suffer just as much from his insomnia at the end of the novel. Yet, even if these characters see no improvement in their painful situation, they seem less desperate at the end of the novel. The work of creation they have undertaken throughout their narration has helped them to leave behind, for a little while, their state as an old man and has allowed them to regain the intellectual vivacity which they thought they had lost. This mental work allows them to find once again a virtuosity which is capable of overcoming their handicap and to gain, at the very least, some compensation for the physical loss which old age imposes on us.

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