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Introduction to "Paul Auster. Report from the Interior"

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Introduction

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Introduction

Sophie VALLAS

- 1 In the LERMA Research Unit, which gathers researchers working on the Anglophone world¹ at Aix-Marseille University, a Programme entitled “The Subject as an Object” was created by academics and doctoral students interested in various forms of writing, of linguistic manipulations and of artistic practices in which the subject somehow becomes especially visible: subjects sometimes captured in biographical or autobiographical enterprises, or subjects represented in works of art which are both watching and being watched by an other, or again speaking subjects which master and control their own discourses or which are sometimes involuntarily revealed in them. In order to try and apprehend such subjects, a cross-cutting approach was chosen so as to favor a dialogue between literature, visual arts, history, linguistics, stylistics, psychoanalysis or philosophy.
- 2 The plurality at the heart of Paul Auster’s fifth autobiographical volume, 2013 *Report from the Interior*, its material and visual heterogeneity as well as its original narrative voice were at the origins of the decision of those researchers to choose it as a common field of exploration. Some of the authors of the present collection of essays are linguists, some are visual art experts and some are specialists of literature. For several of them, their research fields usually bring them to work on genres, forms, periods even which are rather remote from Paul Auster’s universe. The challenge they set for themselves was the following: How would they all approach *Report from the Interior* and develop their respective analyses? How would their individual interests (the epistolary genre; the underlying structures of the fairy tale in modern fiction; the presence of images in a prose text; linguistic analysis of pronouns and voices in self-narratives; the confusion and divisions at the heart of contemporary self-writing...) lead them to read such a multi-faceted work? And what would emerge from this joint venture in terms of the shared interest of its participants in “the subject as an object”?
- 3 The first essay, by the volume editor, first replaces *Report from the Interior* as Auster’s fifth autobiographical text after seminal *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), coincidence-haunted *The Red Notebook* (1995), *Hand to Mouth* (1997) and its reflection on want and money, and somber, body-focused *Winter Journal* (2012). But more largely, it revisits

Auster's whole work as structured by an autobiographical force line. If Auster's work can be seen as deeply autobiographical, Vallas contends, it is not simply because it uses, sometimes playfully, autobiographical elements but because it originates in a life-long, life-writing project that he has been developing ever since his first poems and essays. *Report from the Interior*, this "portrait of a young man in a time of turmoil—and also of a young person trying to become a writer" (Auster in Siegumfeldt 73), is only one of the latest narratives in which he revisits his early years "from another point of view," focusing on how his environment contributed to shape his "inner life, inner development, thought, morality," as well as his views on "aesthetics, politics, religion" (Auster in Siegumfeldt 65). In this strange volume made up of four different parts, of words past and present, of letters and of images, Auster goes on addressing himself as "you," a pronominal choice he already made in *Winter Journal*, and embarks on a fragmented excavation of his most impalpable development.

- 4 In the following essays, the memoir's surprising title, first, gave rise to several readings: while Richard Phelan is musically attracted to its "double 'or'" which gives it "a discreet internal rhyme and final lingering signifier which rings out the idea of an alternative," Nicolas Pierre Boileau insists on its double reference to an exterior and an interior reflecting the "division of the self" which the whole volume highlights. As Monique De Mattia-Viviès further contends, this title which "bears the trace of a conflict whose issue is the person itself" must be carefully analyzed in the way it opposes an exterior and an interior which the use of a deictic article ("the interior") turns into anaphoric notions; besides, the puzzling absence of any article before the noun "report" ("a report," for instance) opens the possibility of reading it as a verb in the imperative, in which case, the title sounds like an urgent order, given by the author to himself, to "report from the interior," to write as a reporter which, as De Mattia-Viviès underlines, implies some sort of time delay separating the reporter from the reported upon, and thus raises delicate issues of objectivity versus subjectivity.
- 5 Where indeed does the report come from? From Paul Auster, the sixty-five-year old writer in search of his lost past, or from the child-Auster before "the boundary of twelve" which the former set as a limit for his text when devising his project (*Report 5*)? Remembering how impressed he was when he read Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* at age eight, Auster recollects his admiration at the way Stevenson, "a grown man when those poems were written," as he knew, nevertheless "deftly and persuasively [...] employed the first person throughout the book, pretending to write from the point of view of a small child" (26). And then, under the reader's eyes, another level of understanding emerges: addressing himself on the very page where he has just been writing about this early realization, thanks to Stevenson, of what point of view and pronominal voice could entail, Auster goes through a second revelation prompted by this first illumination in the present of writing: "and you understand now, suddenly, that this was your first glimpse into the hidden wheelworks of literary creation, the mystifying process by which a person can leap into a mind that is not his own" (26). The reader's attention is therefore twice attracted to the way writers (Stevenson and Auster) circumvent the difficulty, inherent to self-narratives, induced by the age-difference between the child of the memories and the author in the present of narration. But where Stevenson (simply) shifted the point of view and pretended to speak in his child's voice without materializing the separation between the two instances by a change in personal pronouns, Auster turns the child he used to be into another whom he addresses as "you," thus widening the gap between the narrator and

the narratee. Indeed, thanks to some magical power, the use of “you” “literally makes the subject ‘I’ disappear and replaces it with the addressee of the text” (Boileau). It literally “dislodges the ‘I’ from its traditional autobiographical central position,” as Sandrine Sorlin suggests, and creates a reflection with which this autobiographical ‘I’ engages in a dialogue. Even more than that, De Mattia-Viviès argues, the original and sacred status of the “I” suddenly crumbles as “the ‘I’ steps out of himself and dissociates from his self: ‘you’ is a person who is addressed, whereas ‘I’ is nothing but the origin”.

- 6 All the authors of this collection of essays have felt the obligation to resort to various labels in order to make this distinction between the two Austers visible in their texts, just as Vallas does when she juggles with “Auster-the detective,” “Auster-the writer” and “Auster-the real” while evoking simply *City of Glass*. If most authors, about *Report from the Interior*, tend to alternate “the young Paul Auster” and “Auster” in order to underline the difference between the object of the narrative and its author, Sara Watson nicely opts for “Young Auster” and “Current Auster,” capitalizing the adjectives and cutting out the articles, while De Mattia uses “PA” for “young Paul Auster,”. In any case, the use of “you” creates a gap which is both temporal (almost half a century separates the child from the writer) and spatial (Boileau shows that it is the space where the profound division of the subject can appear). More surprisingly, perhaps, it is also visual, as Phelan contends: indeed, the double nature of *Report from the Interior*, made both of words and images, seems to mirror the original division of the self, as if the play “between the verbal and its other, the visual” was another way of reproducing the central “play between self and former self, between self and other”.
- 7 The “you” at the center of *Report from the Interior* is dazzlingly Protean and impersonates every possible instance in turn: it embodies Auster as a child and Auster as the retrospective narrator, but also sometimes Lydia Davis in the letters her lover sends her, and then, at other times, “the representative of a larger entity, [...] you as anyone” (Sorlin), including the reader. Indeed, using Arnaud Schmitt’s definition of autobiography as “a collusion of two desires: ‘the will to tell and the will to know,’”² Sandrine Sorlin shows that the “you” operates as a “space opener”: by allowing Auster to find the perfect “intermediary ‘distancing-immersing’ effect,” the pronoun “allows writer and reader to meet halfway” in “a willing ethical act of caring (for one another)”. De Mattia-Viviès offers a darker reading of Auster’s second-person subject: focusing on every possible type of occurrence of the “you”, she concludes that because it “keeps oscillating between the specific and the generic,” this pronoun of the lost past breaks free from linguistic norms and becomes an “anti-shifter” which sows discord as far as the other personal pronouns as well as the different levels of discourse (direct, indirect, free indirect speech) are concerned: Auster’s multiple uses of “you” finally throw off the linguistic and existential magnet and disturb the entire narrative. “You” becomes considerably obscure, De Mattia-Viviès argues, and even points phonetically to the Jew (*Jude*) young Auster knew only confusedly he was at the time. Boileau, tackling *Report from the Interior* from a Lacanian point of view, develops a similar analysis and reads this text, which presents itself as a portrait of an ordinary kid growing up in the 50s United States, as “an example of what is *not* common in the experience of an(y) American, Jewish boyhood”. Basing his analysis on the photo album and the role it plays in the general economy of the memoir, Phelan also highlights the way *Report from the Interior* raises the issue of “Jewish identity both in terms of the history of World War 2 and of the invisibility of Jews in American life,” and he

underscores Auster's variations on the same theme: the hero of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* becomes "no longer visible" (*Report* 173; the *Fugitive from the Chain Gang* who is irremediably trapped in jail; the people whom the Martians make disappear in *War of the Worlds*; Afro-Americans and Native Americans embodying the "Vanishing American". Phelan thus shows how young Auster, identifying with all these outcasts, regularly experiences absences to himself which he calls "daze," moments during which he temporarily disappears, moments "of non-being, moments of ontological disappearance" (Boileau) which, in order to be related, demand from Auster "a poetic use of language [...] so as to make them his own" (Boileau).

- 8 In her analysis of the influence of fairy tales on Auster's imagination and writing, an influence that he has often acknowledged in his interviews, Marie Gourrut underlines the way the typical fictional Austerian character inevitably goes through a period in which they are made to disappear or, more often, in which they make themselves disappear, experiencing a form of death before coming back to life as new beings. She analyzes Auster's telling of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* and of the impact the movie had upon him when he saw it as a child ("a metaphysical shock," *Report* 106) using the well-honed tools forged by the great specialists of fairy tales and other initiatory narratives, and shows that watching the movie amounted for young Auster to a rite of initiation in which he was as transformed as poor Carey himself, left to rely on his own resourcefulness in order to overcome ritualistic ordeals and to survive the insurmountable. *Report from the Interior* is, she contends, "like *Arabian Nights*, a book of metamorphoses," a "modernized" version of archetypal stories belonging to "the most ancient forms of literature".
- 9 Two essays specifically focus on the last section of *Report from the Interior*, in which 107 images are presented to the reader, captioned with italicized passages taken from the previous sections. Jean-Louis Claret analyzes the original "dialogue" which Auster establishes between words and images, noticing for instance that the captions do not always provide a limpid insight into the illustrations, sometimes working like those "cryptic Renaissance emblems whose meaning was driven home by the close connection between a few words [...] and an image". What comes first, in certain cases, Claret wonders, between the "literary image" created by the writer on the page on the basis of his memories, which prompted him to carry out a search for a visual representation of it, and the "image the grown-up Paul Auster came across years later and regarded, in retrospect, as a good example of the childish enchantment he was striving to recapture?" And what is the impact of these images gathered thus at the end of the book, on the reader's mind? "They show what the reader had endeavored to remember so far," Claret suggests, thus taking the risk of "annihilat[ing] the process that may be regarded as the salt of fiction reading," i.e. "the private projection of mental images on the screen of our minds". As Phelan remarks, these "medium-quality images" have the impossible task of mediating memory and perhaps, also, of standing as "surrogates for missing or non-existent personal images," since Auster explains, in *Report from the Interior*, that almost no trace of his childhood survived: "No drawings... no class pictures from grade school, no report cards, no summer camp pictures, no home movies, no team pictures... For a person born in the mid-twentieth century... your life is the least documented of anyone you have ever known" (177), he writes, thus sending the reader back to a striking passage in *The Invention of Solitude* which shows him in his recently dead father's house, opening a "blank photograph album, This Is Our Life: The Austers" (*Invention* 68). But, as Phelan points out, if the images to a certain

extent “serve to mediate with the viewer, enabling the latter to imagine the story’s particulars while finding with respect to a general one a story close to his own,” they might also include their own failure, or at least their inherent incompleteness, and his essay offers perspectives for “Album,” in *Report from the Interior*, to be seen as a “concept” à la *Sophie Calle* or à la *Warhol*, waiting for a performance, a soundtrack or a voice.

- 10 A voice, that of the author as a young man, is precisely what Sara Watson listens to and deconstructs in her essay devoted to “Time Capsule,” the section in which Auster acts as “a biographer of his own life sources” (Sorlin), “as an editor of a past version of himself” (Watson). This epistolary corpus gives him access to abundant “unpublished juvenilia” which contrast with the disappeared sources belonging to childhood. Watson playfully analyzes the way Auster edits his love letters written while in France, quotes himself in two languages, translates himself, cuts, provides footnotes and comments upon his tone, voice and various poses. Auster’s editorial voice, “which almost seems like a voice-over” and which, in this respect, echoes his voice in the section devoted to the movies, “constantly strives to create narrative coherence and to impose an overarching theme on the fragments: the birth of a writer, with a crescendo of mastery which finds its apex at the end of the chapter” (Watson).

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NOTES

1. LERMA (UR 853) means « Laboratoire d’Études et de Recherche sur le Monde Anglophone ».

2. Arnaud Schmitt, *The Phenomenology of Autobiography. Making it Real*.