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In Search of Lost Lines: “Time Capsule” and the Epistolary Genre in Paul Auster’s *Report from the Interior*

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In Search of Lost Lines: "Time Capsule" and the Epistolary Genre in Paul Auster's *Report from the Interior*

Sara WATSON

« Quoique je ne porte ici que le titre d'éditeur,
j'ai travaillé moi-même à ce livre, et je ne m'en
cache pas.
Ai-je fait le tout, et la correspondance entière est-
elle une fiction ?
Gens du monde, que vous importe ?
C'est sûrement une fiction pour vous. »
(Préface à *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Jean-Jacques
Rousseau)

- 1 In "Time Capsule," the third chapter of *Report From the Interior*, Paul Auster discovers with no small amount of surprise that Lydia Davis, his first wife, has in her possession a number of letters he wrote to her, adding up to more than five hundred pages, spanning from 1966 to the late 1970s. Since she intends to give them to a research library, she proposes to submit them to him first. Upon reading the letters, Auster describes a strong sense of dissociation: "[...] you felt as if you were reading the words of a stranger, so distant was that person to you now, so alien, so unformed, with a sloppy, hasty handwriting that does not resemble how you write today [...]" (181). The correspondence of two young students is now being handled by two celebrated writers: world-famous novelist Paul Auster and fiction-writer and translator Lydia Davis, whose 2004 translation of *Swann's Way* inspired the title of this article.
- 2 By publishing excerpts of these letters in his own book, Auster takes away some of the prerogative of Lydia Davis and acts as an editor on behalf of a past version of himself. At times, he might even appear as a censor, since he decides to expurgate the romantic

contents of the letters, despite their importance in the correspondence: "By and large, the letters can be considered love letters, but the ups and downs of that love are not what concern you now, and you have no intention of turning these pages into a rehash of the romantic dramas you lived through forty-five years ago, for many other things are discussed in the letters as well. [...] They are what you will be extracting from the time capsule that has fallen into your hands [...]". (183) By rejecting the "ups and downs" of one of his love stories and denying the value they might have as another form of "report from the interior," Auster seems at first glance to go against the topos of the epistolary novel, of which the most famous examples are explorations of the tortured subjectivity of affairs of the heart and of the flesh. His cavalier rejection of this subject matter is all the more paradoxical since his introduction to the letters restages tropes familiar to any reader of the *roman épistolaire*: two lovers from different backgrounds, linked by tempestuous love and common literary ambition, occasionally parted by an ocean and engaging in an epistolary relationship. Auster sets up, then debunks, several versions of a *Bildungsroman*, playing with and ruthlessly undermining the reader's expectations. According to John Bray's *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness*, the epistolary novel has come to signify for readers a heightened attention to the subjective nature of reality, the exploration of points of view and a demand for opposing consciousnesses in the course of a correspondence. Auster does not give the reader the space of these discoveries or explorations, since he constantly underlines the particular subjectivity of his "report from the interior" including in the following passage of the first letter written to Lydia Davis: "And what did Paul think? Of how much he loved Lydia. In thinking about her, was he objective? Only as far as love allows one to be objective. The nature of his thoughts? Wistful. Infinite sadness. Infinite longing" (187-188).

- 3 The metaliterary aspect of *Report from the Interior* is never as blatant as it is in this excerpt, embedded as it is in a chapter devoted to the disassociated analysis of a younger Auster by an older Auster, and in a memoir in which the younger incarnations of Auster are referred to by the second person of the singular. Similarly, these musings about the possibility of objective love are perfectly suited to a book questioning the objectivity of recollection and the possibility of the retelling of the self. If this chapter sticks closely to this central thesis of the book, it certainly does not dispel love or the recollection of love. Instead, it pursues the exploration of the innate subjectivity of the epistolary genre.
- 4 In a previous work of fiction, *In the Country of Last Things*, Auster explored the epistolary format but with very different effects, since the narrator of the text is the author of one long letter with no identified recipient. The general dystopian genre of the novel uses the letter format to question memory and the traces it leaves on language, rather than the paper trail of previous identities. Janet Altman reflects in *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* that "for the letter novelist the choice of the epistle as narrative instrument can foster certain patterns of thematic emphasis, narrative action, character types, and narrative self-consciousness" (Altman 9). "Time Capsule" is then Auster's investigation of the literary uses of a correspondence, and of the echoing voices within the selection he makes inside the corpus of his own letters to Lydia Davis.
- 5 Indeed, we will argue here that the chapter uses the format of the romantic epistolary novel in order to shift the reader's relationship to the author, narrator and main character of *Report from the Interior*, eventually forcing the reader to, on the one hand,

imagine the dialogue inherent to a correspondence, and on the other, to collaborate to the rewriting of the self. Through the examination of the fragmented nature of the correspondence, and the monologic text presented to the reader, we shall examine how Auster reframes and reshapes the genre of the memoir.

1. Fragments and meaning

- 6 The epistolary novel is strongly linked to material contingencies: letters arrive too late or are slipped into the wrong envelope and arrive to the wrong person; the letter writer becomes ill or travels for months, interrupting the conversation. Sometimes letters are written over several days or weeks before the writer decides to send them. In his novel *Lettres de deux jeunes mariées*, Balzac cleverly uses this conceit to show the character growth of his two protagonists, young women who when unmarried had all the time in the world to exchange on daily minutiae, but once married no longer find opportunities to write one another. Indeed, in the first years covered by the story the two women exchange almost weekly letters; in the final section of the book years separate the final exchanges. Similarly, when in Paris, Auster sometimes sends two letters a day to Lydia (206-210). A letter dated September 5 consists of two different parts: the first part, written in French, and the second, in English, which heightens the shift in mood and tone. A letter dated February 12 records the lack of news and the interruption of the correspondence: "A whole month and not a word... I called your mother to see if anything had happened to you. She said your new address was London W. 6. The one you gave me was N. 6. Perhaps this has caused a confusion in the mail rooms" (237). This occurs a few months into the separation of the lovers, giving the reader cause to wonder what feelings might have shifted on the other side of the writing desk.
- 7 Auster carefully frames the material conditions in which the letters were produced: separation is the basis of correspondence, and each type of separation is neatly explained and developed. The mood of the letter is summarized and deciphered: "The tone of your letters begins to change after that. The morose, self-absorbed malcontent of the past few months suddenly vanishes, and in his place another, altogether different person starts writing to London" (243). We are also told that "thirteen months went by before you wrote to her again. The long separation was over, and once she returned to New York to continue her studies at Barnard, there was no need for letters anymore" (251-252). This connective tissue between the passages excerpted from the letters gives the reader a form of chronology, which the dates provided with most of the letters can make even more precise. This also transforms what might appear as fragments as constitutive elements of an unfolding story. Thus, the fragments are altogether self-contained universes of meaning and linked in a larger plot. The introductory paragraphs as well as the cuts made in the source material constantly remind the reader that they are reading a recrafted narrative as much as a collection of old letters.
- 8 These paragraphs can be read as introductions to the passages excerpted in the book, but also as a form of return to a previous well of inspiration. As Auster notes in one of these passages, he has frequently used his unpublished juvenilia as a source for his more famous novels: "[...] and when you returned to writing fiction in your early thirties, you went back to those old notebooks and plundered them for material,

sometimes lifting out whole sentences and paragraphs, which then surfaced years after they had been written in those newly reconfigured novels" (194). As this is precisely what Auster is doing here, reconfiguring his letters into a narrative alien to their original conception, we are starkly reminded that this dialogue between two selves is long-standing. The correspondence between Young Auster and Current Auster appears in previous works, but in ways hidden to the reader; here the veil is lifted and the machinery exposed. Instead of completely ruining the illusion of literature, we have an editorial choice that mimics character development as it can be displayed in successful fiction: the transition from Young Auster to Current Auster is the main narrative arc of the chapter. At the end of "Time Capsule," we feel we have a fully-fleshed out character, with his faults, mistakes and discoveries laid out in front of our eyes, as the editor seems to be carefully laying out documents for the reader to peruse and collect.

- 9 Indeed, in his editing choices Auster often selects fragments that follow the traditional lines of a epistolary *Bildungsroman*: we have romantic disappointment ("The honesty of your letter is equaled only by the new-found honesty of my thoughts—caused, no doubt, by the terrible depression I am going through" 213), political rants on *bourgeois philosophy* (212), descriptions of writing and of the writer's life, including the all-important acquisition of a typewriter (228), mentions of poems and of novels being written or edited. Current Auster himself plays multiple roles in his edition of the letters. He plays the literary critic by commenting upon the style of the text: "a rambling letter of six pages that begins oddly, pretentiously, with a number of chopped-up sentences [...]" (188). He translates wide swaths of his text from the Paris correspondence, since the letters are filled with fragments of conversation in French or even written in French, which are then translated in the notes. The comparison between the two texts shows that Auster has subtly changed the tone of his French in his letters, making the translation more literary, less clumsy: "la chair est invisible, trop loin de toucher" becomes "the flesh is invisible, too far away to be touched"; "il n'y a ni commencement de commençant ni fin de finissant" is transcribed as "There is neither a beginning to beginning nor an end to ending." By erasing the less than idiomatic turns of phrases employed by Young Auster, Current Auster seems to voluntarily emphasize his progress and evolution, refusing to mimic his imperfections and making the multilingual reader notice the discrepancy.¹ Such a multilingual reader would be quite typical in the 18th or 19th century, when the epistolary novel became an extremely popular genre.
- 10 Auster, himself a professional translator during his career, thus gives us a full demonstration of his literary powers, from writing to editing and translating all the way into collaging. In this way, the reader feels they are not in the presence of a single character (who happens to be the past version of the narrator) but confronted by several voices, juxtaposed on a single page, be it at the top (the editorial context), the bottom (the footnotes), or the letter placed at the center of the reading experience.

2. Monologic dialogues

- 11 The question of the target of a written text appears to have troubled Auster since his youth. In the introduction to the chapter, he muses on his incapacity to keep a diary: "The problem with the journal was that you didn't know what person you were supposed to be addressing, whether you were talking to yourself or to someone else

[...]" (179). Since we are not privy to Lydia Davis' letters to Auster, the epistolary form here is monologic. The weight of her presence varies in the letters: sometimes she is directly addressed ("You say you want to know the details of my life. I will try to tell you..." 233), sometimes her letters are explicitly answered ("Your latest letter...Again, I say to you, don't worry about *me*. I'm all right, really. Have no doubts about yourself in relation to me. Let us not raise questions about problems we know cannot be answered at this time." 237-238). Sometimes the letters appear to be monologues, yet Auster's musings on his personality are often framed as belonging to the continuing dialogue with his correspondent: "I say these things about myself to let you know—because you seem to want to know" (239). This only enhances the feeling that the correspondence is a stylistic exercise as much as a human interaction: often Auster appears to enact the part of the gloomy young artist to perfection. As he writes to Lydia: "It seems that fate is working against us. This is difficult to say. I hope I can, I've made myself a bit drunk to be able to face the page" (232).

- 12 Yet the most vivid dialogue on the page is between Young Auster and Current Auster. The choice of addressing his younger self by the pronoun "you" makes this obvious. The reader has muddled through the multiplicity of selves present in the text from the beginning and wonders if this is indeed a monologic epistolary chapter or, on the contrary, a dialogic one, in which the answers would be given decades later by the transformed self who had authored the original letters. This sensation of confusing identities is bolstered by the presence of similar games in the letters themselves. In one of the "playful, jocular" letters (243) selected by Auster at the end of the chapter, Young Auster uses the pronoun "we" to describe his voice: "We, madame (ma femelle), your humble servant, have recently formulated plans for a lightning-swift conquest of the world. [...]" (246). This plural self then reveals an alter-ego, Humpty-Dumpty: "Humpty-Dumpty, madame, *nôtre femelle*, wishes to convey his complete accord with the private revelations transformed into calligraphic notations for him in your most recent letter" (246). The letter is then signed "the Dwarf". Epistolary novels are the perfect background for such spirited forays into hidden identities: anonymous letters or letters signed under a false name, as in *Evelina* by Fanny Burney in which the marriage between the titular heroine and Lord Orville is delayed by an insulting letter supposedly sent by Orville to Evelina, which is eventually revealed to be a fake authored by her suitor, Sir Clement Willoughby. Here, "the Dwarf" is a playful riff on such literary tropes, but the reference to nursery rhymes also points at the British origin both of Humpty-Dumpty and the epistolary novel. The use of French in the text with "madame ma femelle" opening the letter also is reminiscent of the tone of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, with its emphasis on formal yet erotic addresses. The introductory insistence on not discussing a romantic correspondence has never felt less accurate.
- 13 The major difference between "Time Capsule" and the previous chapters of the book lie in this emphasis on dialogue and on the position taken by the reader. Whereas in earlier portions of the text we are merely witnesses to the declarations made by Current Auster to Young Auster, in this chapter we are made to wonder about the blanks in the text. The numerous cuts that appear in the letters, symbolized by "[...]", as well as the mysterious figure of Lydia, omnipresent yet speaking only through the prism of Auster's words, are constant reminders that we are being given partial accounts of the past. As readers, we cannot help but question the version of himself given by Auster and try to fill in the voids that appear throughout the chapter, as

though the letters were meant for us. In fact, the letters are now meant for us and our consumption: we have become the intended reader, which frames us as a love object as well.

- 14 And yet there are even more games being played here: Auster is giving us a taste of the rich archival material Lydia Davis will be putting on display for academic research, which will in the future enable critics to examine the parts of the letters censored and chosen, adding to the rich tapestry of narration of *Report from the Interior*. Similarly, until Lydia Davis' answering letters are also published, the reader is left to imagine the counterpoint of the melody provided by Auster: the harmony between the voices is a creation of the reader, not of the author. Finally, the editorial voice, which almost seems like a voice-over, 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.

3. Shifting literary forms

- 15 "You wish now that you had kept a diary [...] but you never developed the habit of writing about yourself" (178). The time capsule, as a concept, is an uneasy cohabitation between present and future: it is targeted towards an imaginary audience from days to come, in order to create a material evocation of a time which has presumably been forgotten and erased. As Paul K. Saint Amour develops in his book *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*, the time capsule appears as a form of pre-emptive weaponry (Saint Amour 180-81) against the eradication of the past. The letters collected by Lydia Davis, as they are read by Current Auster, are a double-edged weapon: they protect Current Auster from the erasure of his own past, while shaping his future legacy. The shifting form of the chapter on this Time Capsule, while claiming to represent the confusing layers of memory and self-identification, are also a way of distorting and reshaping the traditional role of the epistolary novel.
- 16 The last letter of the chapter constitutes an exception for several reasons: it is the longest letter of the corpus given to Auster by his ex-wife and the only one written on a typewriter (253). This letter is also introduced not only by a narrative explanatory passage but also by end notes, in which Auster openly questions the tone of his letter: "It puzzles you that you shared the story of sleeping with another girl with the girl you thought of as your girlfriend, for the genial tone that runs through the letter does not suggest that you and Lydia were on the outs just then. At the same time, [...] perhaps you felt the story would amuse her, as if it were a story you were sharing with a friend, rather than a lover or (future) spouse" (253). This puzzlement is hardly shared by the reader, who can sense the echoes of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* in the situation. Double entendres are scattered throughout the letter: "Lately I have taken to writing on the typewriter...Less hesitation, more flow, a quicker discharge...."² Several elements in the letter play with the idea of voyeurism: the burlesque show attended by Auster and his friend during which he muses: "I would like to get to speak to one of them, in particular the French woman, by far the oldest of the lot, who was also the announcer" (264). Later, after baking a cake with girls and three dope peddlers who are subletting a flat: "The time was passed by filling out a Playboy questionnaire on sex, eating the cake, carrying on" (267). Of course, the most flagrant passage is the one describing the sexual encounter between Auster and a woman from Detroit, which is being delayed by one of

the drug dealers' insistent presence: "Finally, he offered to go out to buy some beer. We took this opportunity to begin kissing on the couch [...] I was surprised to discover that she wore no underwear [...] We made love until dawn, lustily and with no inhibitions" (268). The easy flow and verve of the letter shows the pleasure Auster takes in the description of sensuality, seducing the reader as he shows off his prose and his storytelling, which he occasionally interrupts with addresses to Lydia: "Let me kiss you good night" (260). Another trope of the epistolary novel is the contagious effect of the emotion being described: an erotic letter is meant to excite the reader. Auster's letter becomes an exercise in transcribing the pleasure of writing. As Barthes writes in *Le plaisir du texte*: "Si je lis avec plaisir cette phrase, cette histoire ou ce mot, c'est qu'ils ont été écrits dans le plaisir (ce plaisir n'est pas en contradiction avec les plaintes de l'écrivain). Mais le contraire? Écrire dans le plaisir m'assure-t-il-moi, écrivain-du plaisir de mon lecteur? Nullement. Ce lecteur, il faut que je le cherche, (que je le 'drague') sans savoir où il est"³. Letter writing enhances the seductive nature of writing: it directly addresses, cajoles, implores one or several readers in a direct fashion. Contrary to Barthes, the epistolary novelist knows where at least one of their readers are, be they fictional or real. Young Auster might be trying to communicate something more ambiguous than unadulterated pleasure in his correspondent (jealousy, rivalry), but Current Auster can return to a purer form of enjoyment in his relationship with the now anonymous person reading his book. As Young Auster himself concludes in the letter: "I wanted to write you a long letter in order to hold your attention for as long as possible" (271). This can be read as a dual address to Lydia as well as to the reader: the strange and maybe perverse pleasure taken in reading autobiographies, memoirs and private correspondence is rewarded here by the enjoyment the reader is encouraged to share with the author, making them feel that they are the love object he is trying to seduce.

- 17 The length of this final letter, as well as its position as the final example of narrative text in *Report from the Interior* (the next chapter presents ironic riffs on captions rather than a complete storyline), seems to mark a transition to a new medium. The use of the typewriter separates it from the handwritten letters, and its storytelling prowess seems to foretell Auster's success as a writer of fiction.
- 18 The genre of the autobiography or the memoir encourages specific mechanisms in the reader: identification, curiosity, and voyeurism. *Report from the Interior* as well as Auster's previous memoir *Winter Journal* play with the format of the autobiography by switching either the traditional narrative voice or the point of view. Here, the attempt at recalling the past appears as a form of archeological dig: layers of the self are exposed and made to engage in dialog with the present, giving the reader the choice to read the epistolary chapter as an excerpt from a Paul Auster novel (the birth of a writer), as a collection of archival fragments, as a conversation between two iterations of the self or even, more ambitiously, as a hybrid literary practice: an autobiographical epistolary novel. As Auster brings up his own memories of the references most impactful on his formative years, he encourages the reader to confront their own to his, in a fulfilling and shared metatextual experience.
- 19 "A time capsule must never be tampered with," Auster tells us in one of his footnotes (254). Yet as we have shown, this assertion is more coquettish than accurate. Auster's "tampering" comes not in the shape of rewriting but in his cuts, editorial commentary, notes and translations. In *Here and Now*, a collection of letters exchanged by J.M.

Coetzee and Paul Auster and published in 2013, the reader has the impression that the two writers are writing with future (or posthumous) publication in mind. They are impossible to consume without the glare of posterity backlighting the two figures of Important Writers. Here the letters of Young Auster are much less guarded, less skillful, more improvisational, at least in appearance. The seasoned and celebrated writer who edits them however has the art of transforming them into iconic passages which can serve as companion pieces to his other works. Their careful selection and framing make the reader read this autobiographical chapter as a passage of epistolary fiction. The time capsule presented is a curated exhibition but also a love letter to past times, past illusions and past selves. The reader is then free to make their own selection among this reader's digest, and to tamper themselves with the piles of letters Auster has thrown into their lap, perusing these lines once lost and now beautifully offered to their literary curiosity.

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NOTES

1. Lydia Davis would be the first to notice these discrepancies as a celebrated translator from French into English.
2. In Letter XLVIII, Valmont writes to the woman he is attempting to seduce a letter filled with double entendres, which his previous letter to Madame de Merteuil can allow us to decipher. While the reader knows he uses the back of one of his mistresses as a writing bureau, the Présidente Tourvel can hardly guess this from the following lines: "La table même sur laquelle je

vous écris, consacrée pour la première fois à cet usage, devient pour moi l'autel sacré de l'amour; combien elle va s'embellir à mes yeux ! J'aurai tracé sur elle le serment de vous aimer toujours !" ("The table on which I am writing to you, which has never before been used thus, becomes for me the holy altar of love; how much more beautiful it shall become in my eyes ! I will have written on it the oath of my ever-lasting love for you !") (Choderlos de Laclos 326)

3. "If I read this sentence, this story or this word with pleasure, it is because they were written with pleasure (this pleasure is not contradictory with the complaining of the writer). But what about the opposite? Does writing in pleasure guarantee me-me, the writer-the pleasure of my reader? Absolutely not. This reader must be sought out by me ("picked up" by me), without knowing where he is." Author's translation. (Barthes 108)

ABSTRACTS

The appearance of a certain number of early letters sent to Lydia Davis in *Report From The Interior* can seem surprising in a text which exposes the discovery of the outside world from the perspective of an interior subjectivity, since the added textual layers can appear almost overwhelming. However, by using the epistolary genre, Paul Auster manages not only to make the subtle game between the reader and the different incarnations of himself even more playful, but also to use the background of the European novel of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Thus, he is able to question not only his self or himself, but the notion of the genre in which he is emmeshed, going so far as to uncover the possibilities of the hybrid nature of an autobiographical text which introduces a correspondence between two different versions of the author.

L'utilisation de lettres de jeunesse (envoyées par Paul Auster à Lydia Davis) dans *Report From The Interior* peut surprendre dans le cadre d'un livre qui confronte l'intériorité à la découverte du monde extérieur, tant cette capsule temporelle, comme l'appelle l'écrivain, brasse plusieurs niveaux de lecture. Cependant, la forme épistolaire ainsi convoquée permet à Paul Auster non seulement de complexifier le jeu instauré entre le lecteur et les différentes incarnations du narrateur, mais également de s'inscrire dans la tradition du roman européen, de la période des Lumières au début du XIX^{ème} siècle. Cette inscription lui permet de constamment remettre en cause la question même du genre dans lequel il travaille, et d'explorer l'hybridité autorisée par un texte autobiographique qui initie une correspondance entre deux versions de l'auteur.

INDEX

Keywords: Paul Auster, Lydia Davis, epistolary literature, autobiography, memoir, letters

Mots-clés: Paul Auster, Lydia Davis, littérature épistolaire, récit de soi, correspondance

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