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## Speaking the Unspeakable: Auster's Semiotic World

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

### SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE: AUSTER'S SEMIOTIC WORLD

FRANÇOIS HUGONNIER

*We are connected, we can't be isolated from one another because we all live inside of language.*

—Paul Auster (Francis 1990, 16)

Starting at the brink of adulthood, Paul Auster's literary activity was inspired by "a set of questions" that have never stopped haunting him since then. When Larry McCaffery talks about the fact that Auster's books are really "the same book" and asks him about the nature of that book, he answers that it is "the saga of the things that haunt [him]. Like it or not", he continues, "all my books seem to revolve around the same set of questions, the same human dilemmas" (Auster 1995, 123). Auster endlessly questions the nature of reality and language, and his books always deal with language and the world's interconnectedness. As he explains to Jim Francis, "in poetry, a rhyme will yoke together two things that don't seem connected, yet the fact that they rhyme creates an association, and starts you thinking about new kinds of connections on the world. The same thing occurs with events in life" (Francis 1990, 15). Auster's world view started to take shape in his work as a poet and essayist, and even as early as his "Notes from a Composition Book" (Auster 2004b [1967], 203-5).

While most of Auster's essays deal with the output of various writers' traumatic and pathological relationship to language, his poems reveal his own failure to speak of the world. Jacques Dupin defines Auster's poetry as a "cold duel with language" and speaks of "the poem's complete uncertainty in its infinite approach, in its blind journey across language and the world" (Dupin 1994, 8; my translation). In the poem "Narrative", Auster writes that "if we speak / of the world / it is only to leave the world / unsaid" (Auster 2004b, 143)<sup>1</sup>. This defeat is due to the inadequacy of

language and the poet's inescapable interconnection with the semiotic world that surrounds him and dwells in him: "myself / the sound of a word / I cannot speak. [...] / so much silence / [...] so many words / lost in the wide world / within me" ("In Memory of Myself", Auster 2004b, 148).

In Auster's novels, the restrictions of language often confine the characters to the room and the act of writing (Quinn, Fanshawe, Anna Blume, Samuel Farr, David Zimmer, Sidney Orr, Mr. Blank, Adam Walker), depriving them of speech (especially in *The New York Trilogy*, *The Brooklyn Follies* and *Man in the Dark*) and memory (*In the Country of Last Things*, *Travels in the Scriptorium*, *Invisible*). Throughout his career Auster has tried to get through the walls of language and subjectivity. The limits of the self, of the book and of language generated a poetry that is reminiscent of the Objectivists and the Jewish tradition, and Auster's fiction still bears witness to these early influences.

This chapter focuses on the devices used by Paul Auster to overcome the limits of the say-able. After analyzing Auster's search for linguistic consistency in his essays and poems, we will show how he enhances the power of language by wandering in its margins, using new narrative forms and voices in order to speak the unspeakable in his post-9/11 fiction. Like Gilles Deleuze who considers literature as the creation of a people to come (1993, 15), *The Brooklyn Follies'* narrator Nathan Glass wants to "resurrect [people] in words" by writing their biography and concludes that "one should never underestimate the power of books" (Auster 2005a, 302). Auster's novels are seldom autobiographical as regards plots and stories. However, when it comes to metaphysics, the man is inseparable from the oeuvre. When I interviewed him on the act of writing and spirituality in his work, Paul Auster told me that he was

not a believer. But there is always this idea that we haven't invented the world. We haven't created it. There are transcendental aspirations in each soul for something bigger than us. [...] I see myself as belonging to the world. Most of the time people are cut off from the world, isolated, but sometimes we feel connected. Those are life's happiest moments, aren't they? (Hugonnier 2005, 2)<sup>2</sup>

As Jacques Derrida and the post-structuralists have pointed out, metaphysics is always built on a language and sign theory with which it forms a system (Agacinski 1994, 775). In Auster's latest novels, this system reaches maturity, but in order to access its full scope we first have to go back to its foundations.

Speaking of his early critical work, Auster claims that he “looked on those pieces as an opportunity to articulate some of [his] ideas about writing and literature, to map out some kind of aesthetic position” (Auster 1995, 130). As he explains to Joseph Mallia, “in some sense, these little pieces of literary journalism were the training ground for the novels” (Auster 1995, 106). Auster had the freedom to choose the authors he would write about, and he was particularly interested in the work of Jewish poets who have experimented new modes of representation after Auschwitz (Jabès, Reznikoff, Celan, Perec) and others “who have contributed something important to the language” (Auster 1995, 108). Most of them tackle the paradox of the over-communicative aspect of language and its malfunction when it comes to saying the things that have to be said. Auster’s preface to his translation of Jacques Dupin’s *Fits and Starts*, written in 1971, is his first public expression of an ever growing sense of the distance between the perceptive eye and the “creative word”:

The poetic word is essentially the creative word, and yet, nevertheless, a word among others, burdened by the weight of habit and layers of dead skin that must be stripped away before it can regain its true function. (Auster 1974, 3)

Auster deplors the fact that the word of man does not have the dreamed powers of the Word of God, even though “it is language that creates us and defines us as human beings” (“New York Babel” in Auster 2003, 329). This metaphysical statement was written in reaction to the work of schizophrenic Louis Wolfson who wanted to get rid of his mother tongue and form a new language based on phonetic and phonemic connections taken from various languages. Wolfson’s mother played the opposite role of Stillman (who forbade his son Stillman Jr. to speak English in Auster’s first novel “City of Glass”), since she would come into the room shrieking words in English, for both sound and obscure reasons, as Deleuze explains in his preface to *Le Schizo et les Langues* (1970). This strange out-of-print piece of work, which came from a highly disturbed relationship with language, is a cornerstone of Auster’s groundwork. He enthusiastically refers to it as “one of those rare works that can change our perception of the world” (Auster 2003, 330). Wolfson’s lonely and insane craft is reminiscent of young Stillman’s poetry. After years of confinement in a locked room, Stillman pretends to be able to speak “God’s language”:

I am the only one who knows what the words mean. They cannot be translated. [...] They are God’s language, and no one else can speak them.

[...] That is why Peter lives so close to God. That is why he is a famous poet. (Auster 1987, 19-20)

Both Stillman and Wolfson's words "exclude all possibility of translation" (Auster 2003, 325). After trying to reach a utopian linguistic purity in his poems like his mentor William Bronk, Auster mocks it in his fiction. While Stillman (father) conducts his experiments with the B-A-B-E-L cartography and the Word of God, his abused son has become the ironical archetype of a great poet.

Auster often uses poetry as a way to purify the eroded and polluted word of man. This search for a language "prior to language" (Finkelstein 1995, 53) is a basic concern of the objectivists, and especially Auster's friend George Oppen who, in his eyes, seems to get rid of the "layers of dead skin" as "the language is almost naked, and the syntax seems to derive its logic as much from the silences around words as from the words themselves" (Auster 1981, 49-50). In "The Decisive Moment", Auster makes a similar statement about another one of his great objectivist influences:

Reznikoff is essentially a poet of *naming*. One does not have the sense of a poetry immersed in language but rather of something that takes place before language and comes to fruition at the precise moment language has been discovered. (Auster 1990, 224)

Indeed, in Auster's poetry and as early as "Spokes" ("Lifted into speech, it carries / Its own birth", 2004b, 33) and "Unearth", the act of naming creates the poems as much as the poems struggle toward naming ("A remnant / grief, merging / with the not yet nameable", Auster 2004b, 51). Going farther than the basic proposition he wrote in his "Composition Book",<sup>3</sup> Auster apprehends language as a means to organize experience ("from one stone touched / to the next stone / named", Auster 2004b, 50), but the creation of language tends to be experienced too as we "become the name / of what we name" (Auster 2004b, 41). The poem is a *mise en scène* of the open eye as a passageway for the world ("He is alive, and therefore he is nothing / but what drowns in the fathomless hole / of his eye", in "Disappearances", Auster 2004b, 107), leaving nothing but a vague remnant worded on the page: "You ask / words of me, and I / will speak them—from the moment / I have learned / to give you nothing" (in "Unearth", Auster 2004b, 48).

The poet breathes the sky in and out of his lungs, he internalizes the external world, but his word can only translate the blind search for pure objectivity. Consciousness and language disturb the poet's great "animal's

vision", as Rilke calls it in the *Duino Elegies* (1922). In *L'Espace littéraire* (1955), Blanchot explains that Rilke deemed the animal's small degree of consciousness to be a key to enter reality without being the center of it. It is a way for the disembodied subject to enter the world and to let the world enter him with a wide open eye. This eye does not feed the subject's inner world but always keeps on opening to the unique world at large (Blanchot 1955, 172-5). Auster's consciousness allows him to travel everywhere he likes when he is locked in a room, as he suggests in "White Spaces",<sup>4</sup> but this internal reverberation also compels him to relentless representation. Rilke and objectivists such as Reznikoff have tried to reach this "animal's vision" in order to overcome the limits of subjectivity:

The *one* space extends through all beings:  
 The world's inner space. The birds fly silently  
 Through us. O, wanting to grow,  
 I look out, and the tree grows in me. (Blanchot 1955, 174)

After Rilke in this 1914 poem entitled "All things almost summon us to feeling", Auster produces a similar interconnection and blurs the line between inside (the subject) and outside (the world) as he speaks of "A tree" that "will take root in us / and rise in the light / of our mouths" in the poem "Scribe" (Auster 2004b, 69). The inner image of a tree is named and can be communicated and re-presented thanks to the mouth. These lines allude to the linguistic reality that "extends through all beings". In Auster's seven-part poem "Disappearances" (1975), language is precisely what connects people and paradoxically builds a stone wall that prevents one from knowing someone else's interiority. The poet invents his own solitude by constituting himself as a subject ("and what he sees / is all that he is not: a city", Auster 2004b, 107). Like a child, when he says "I", he differentiates himself from the world that surrounds him even if he increasingly becomes conscious of his connectedness with it ("Therefore, he says I, / and counts himself / in all that he excludes, / which is nothing", Auster 2004b, 112).<sup>5</sup> The objectivists' goal is an intrinsic impossibility, and Auster's poetry acknowledges this paradox as the linguistic process of subjectivation ("and those who would speak / to give birth to themselves", Auster 2004b, 108) leads to erasure and nothingness ("I believe, then, / in nothing / these words might give you", in "Facing the Music", Auster 2004b, 151). Finkelstein thus speaks of the poem's "resolute unmaking" and he asserts that "all the reassuring materials of the objectivist lyric, quietly celebrated for their mere being—are gone" (Finkelstein 1995, 53).

Auster's deconstruction of language starts with Genesis. In Umberto Eco's words, "Creation itself arose through an act of speech; it is only by

giving things their name that [God] created them and gave them an ontological status” (Eco 1995, 7). Auster’s visceral approach to language is inscribed in the aftermath of the *confusio linguarum*, the confusion emanating from the fall of the Tower of Babel. The subsequent diversity of languages is an irreversible linguistic fragmentation. The loss of the original perfect language (the Word of God used by Adam in the Garden before the Fall) and the chaos involved by the inadequacy of human languages are a fundamental leitmotiv in Auster’s work. It first appears in the “Composition book” and then in the poetic work, for instance in “Scribe”: “The name / never left his lips: he talked himself / into another body: he found his room again / in Babel” (Auster 2004b, 69). In the poem “Gnomon”, Auster reaches a certain purity of the word, a perfect harmony at the brink of silence, when all the words have been used up. The ancient Greek word *gnomon* refers to the part of a sundial that projects the shadow. By extension the gnomon refers to man, and the poetic “I” stands as this one man in the “enormous / vineyards of the living” (Auster 2004b, 128). But is the poetic “I” able to cast the shadow of his perception of the world? The gnomon suggests a rare *conformal* system of representation, which is the aim of the universal search for the perfect language, as explained by Umberto Eco:

In Hjelmslev’s terms the two planes of a natural language (form and content) are *not conformal*. This means that the expression-form and the expression-content are structured according to different criteria: the relationship between the two planes is arbitrary, and variations of form do not automatically imply a point-to-point variation of the corresponding content. [...] However, this feature of natural languages is not necessarily a feature of other semiotic systems, which can be *conformal*. Think of an analogue clock: here the movement of the hands corresponds to the movement of the earth around the sun, but the slightest movement (and every new position) of the hands corresponds to a movement of the earth: the two planes are point-to-point conformal. (Eco 1995, 22-3)

Contrary to the gnomon, poetry and language are not conformal systems of representation. In “Facing the Music”, Auster’s “valediction to poetry” (Finkelstein 2004, 14), the poet deplores:

our own lack  
of knowing what it is  
we see, and merely to speak of it  
is to see  
how words fail us, how nothing comes right  
in the saying of it, not even these words

I am moved to speak. (Auster 2004b, 151)

The last poems written between 1976 and 1979 often point at the impossibility of rendering experience faithfully in a nutshell. The poet is unable to abolish time, to capture the outside world and turn it into speech. The poet's impossible "purity and consistency of language" (Auster 1995, 133) is stated in the concluding lines of "Facing the Music" ("as if / there could never be another word / that would hold me / without breaking", Auster 2004b, 152). Auster's early works of prose confirm that his vision cannot be communicated by a single word. In "White Spaces"—Auster looks back on this piece as "the bridge between writing poetry and writing prose" (Auster 1995, 132)—he expresses his frustration with unprecedented clarity: "It comes from my voice. But that does not mean these words will ever be what happens" (Auster 2004b, 155). Facing the unspeakable, Auster starts using language's irrevocable flaws in a new and extended form.

In *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), Auster draws a parallel between "suffocating" and his inability to say. "Never before have I been so aware of the rift between thinking and writing", he concludes, adding that "the story [he is] trying to tell is somehow incompatible with language" (Auster 1988, 32). Auster's farewell to poetry is enclosed in the predicament of Freuchen, the arctic explorer stuck in his igloo surrounded by starving wolves (in "White Spaces"). If he breathes he will wall himself to death with his own freezing breath, but if he does not breathe, he will certainly die too. As this metaphor illustrates, Auster needs to use language in order to be in the world, and yet it increasingly smothers him. In "Interior", after using a similar image ("a scarab devoured in the sphere of its own dung", Auster 2004b, 67), Auster divulges the duality of his condition in one of his most accomplished concluding stanzas: "In the impossibility of words, / in the unspoken word that asphyxiates, / I find myself" (Auster 2004b, 69). Even though its eggs could not hatch, Auster's "reptilian writing" (Dupin, 1994, 9) managed to slough off its skin and wind its way from poetry to prose. As Auster tells Joseph Mallia, "if it really has to be said, it will create its own form" (Auster 1995, 104).

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In order to shed new light on Auster's early dilemmas, we need to move on to the study of the unspeakable in his fiction. After becoming a narrative motivator in his very first novels—rising from the linguistic remnants of the Tower of Babel and the Holocaust—the unnameable suddenly reappeared in the aftermath of the attacks on the Twin Towers.



Genesis and the episode of the Tower of Babel inspired Stillman's insane linguistic experiments and wanderings in the first volume of *The New York Trilogy* (1987). In Auster's next novel *In the Country of Last Things* (1987),<sup>6</sup> Anna Blume intimates that man must act as a daily Adam in the city where language gradually disappears and melts into oblivion: "you must encounter each thing as if you have never known it before. No matter how many times, it must always be the first time" (Auster 1989, 7). The text is suffused with silent connections with Babel. Isabel loses the power of speech before dying, making

an awful noise that sounded like chaos itself. Spittle was dribbling down from the corners of her mouth, and the noise kept pouring out of her, a dirge of unimaginable confusion and pain. (Auster 1989, 78)

Isabel's spittle recalls the crumbling of stones in poems such as "Meteor" ("the dust / of the smallest stone / that falls from the eaves / of Babel", Auster 2004b, 133). Anna portrays a *confusio linguarum* in which "chaos itself" precedes the "confusion". Besides, we may observe the paronomasia between Babel and Isabel. In the post-Holocaust landscape of *In the Country of Last Things*, Anna Blume explains how words fail her when she is exposed to unbearable visions such as a dead child with her head crushed: "Your mind seems to balk at forming the words, you somehow cannot bring yourself to do it" (Auster 1989, 19). In "Ghosts", Blue's "stability into his relationship with a small and very narrowly defined world" (Brown 2007, 46) is based on language. Blue reenacts the linguistic creation of the world:

It will not do to call a lamp a bed, he thinks, or the bed a lamp. No, these words fit snugly around the things they stand for, and the moment Blue speaks them, he feels a deep satisfaction, as though he has just proved the existence of the world. (Auster 1987, 148)

Twenty years later, Auster goes back to these considerations in *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006), which reads like a matrix of his overall work. The name of the main character Mr Blank refers to the character's erased memory, to the writer's blank page, a clean slate ready to be filled with names and stories. After Anna, who is a central character again, Mr Blank is a new daily Adam literally naming the things that are in front of his eyes and who feels guilty for having done "something terrible... unspeakable..." to Anna (Auster 2006, 21). Every day he is the first man and he creates the world as he tries to make sense of the clues that surround him in the room. His irrational behavior is evocative of the Pilgrim Fathers who lived in the

confinement of the first colonies (their new Garden of Eden) and stayed away from the wilderness of the outside world (the Devil's realm). The initial situation includes words attached to each object in the room. The strips of paper are the substantive proof of the irreducible distance between words and objects. Towards the end of the novella, Mr Blank experiences a new kind of *confusio linguarum*:

After a thorough investigation, he is horrified to discover that not a single label occupies its former spot. The wall now reads CHAIR. The lamp now reads BATHROOM. The chair now reads DESK. [...] He always took great pains to write up his reports on their activities in a language that would not betray the truth of what they saw and thought and felt at each step along the way. To indulge in such infantile whimsy is to throw the world into chaos, to make life intolerable for all but the mad. Mr Blank has not reached the point where he cannot identify objects that do not have their names affixed to them, but there is no question that he is in decline, and he understands that a day might come [...] when his brain will erode still further and it will become necessary for him to have the name of the thing on the thing in order for him to recognize it. (Auster 2006, 103-5)

The word *chaos*<sup>7</sup> is used again and Mr Blank's situation is similar to Anna's when she makes an inventory of the lexical disappearances (Auster 1989, 89). The allusion to "Ghosts" is also obvious here, but this time, Auster breaks the linguistic order of things. This will to destroy language and test its workings when words and characters are pushed to their limit is a constant in Auster's fiction. The characters always have to restore peace to a broken universe.

Two decades after *The New York Trilogy*, the theme of the Word of God is revisited in *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005) with Reverend Bob's experiment:

Every time we talked, we drowned out the voice of God. Every time we listened to the words of men, we neglected the words of God. From now on, he said, every member of the church above the age of fourteen would spend one day a week in total silence. In that way, we would be able to restore our connection with God, to hear him speaking within our souls. (Auster 2005a, 265)

The confrontation and the fusion of silence and speech are at the center of *The Brooklyn Follies'* plot. They form a pattern that encompasses the slightest details such as character names, semantic fields and literary references. Starting as soon as the opening sentence in which Nathan Glass explains that he "was looking for a quiet place to die" (Auster 2005a, 1)

nothing seems to escape this silence/speech grid. The whole novel is infused with the irreducible difference between sign and object. The underlying ontological questioning is also raised through the constant duality between presence and absence (“The absent Aurora” is representative of Auster’s philosophy of presence, as “if she’s anywhere now, it is only in her daughter’s face, in the little girl’s loyalty to her, in Lucy’s unbroken promise not to tell us where she is”, Auster 2005a, 198), and through several dichotomies including male/female (as illustrated by the transsexual character Tina Hott), inside/outside (Aurora is locked in a room and reduced to silence by David Minor while Nathan goes on a trip to save her), body/soul (Nathan speaks of his mystical near-death experience, Auster 2005a, 297), and original/fake. As Auster reminds us in “White Spaces”, faking is a characteristic of language as “words falsify the things they attempt to say” (Auster 2004b, 158) and therefore it is impossible to make out the originals from the facsimiles. Reverend Bob is referred to as a “fraud”, a “scam-artist” (Auster 2005a, 263). Many characters are fakes (“the ersatz James Joyce”, Auster 2005a, 221<sup>8</sup>) and the plot is built around a nonexistent original manuscript of Hawthorne (“an elaborate hoax within a hoax”, Auster 2005a, 210). The proliferation of fake works of art and the presence of transsexual characters make *The Brooklyn Follies* read as a rewriting, or a copy of William Gaddis’s *The Recognitions* (1955). In *The Brooklyn Follies*, Gaddis’s name appears on the shelves of original first editions in Brightman’s Attic, and *The Recognitions* is precisely a novel about art forgery. William Gaddis borrowed the title from the Clementine *Recognitions* whose original version is lost and simply seems to have never existed. Just as in *The Recognitions*, the fake paintings in *The Brooklyn Follies* turn out to be better than the originals:

not only had Dryer duplicated the look and feel of one of Smith’s canvases, [...] but he had taken Smith even so slightly farther than Smith had ever gone himself. It was Smith’s *next painting*. (Auster 2005a, 44)

As Brigitte Félix explains, in *The Recognitions* the origin is out of reach in a world filled with all kinds of forgers, fake objects and copies whose originals were lost (Félix 1997, 37). In *The Brooklyn Follies*, this phenomenon extends to language. Like the fake Hawthorne manuscript, the Word of God is an unattainable origin. We soon realize that every element of the plot can be seen as an exploration of the impossibilities inherent to language. Sign and object are analogue to fake and original, and with a closer look, the reader will get a glimpse of the linguistic construction of the text. The plumbing often shows, and especially when it

comes to naming: Harry Brightman/Dunkel (*Dark* in German) is yet another representative dichotomy of Paul Auster's two-sides-of-the-coin alchemist game. Harry is first presented by what he is not:

Harry Brightman did not exist. [...] Nearly everything Tom thought he knew about Harry was false. Forget the childhood in San Francisco [...]. Forget Exeter and Brown. (Auster 2005a, 32)

Harry is reduced to a play on words, which emphasizes his illusory presence.<sup>9</sup> We may also note the generic reference to simulacra and hyper-reality contained in the title of the book (a “folly” is, among other things, an *imitation* castle). In a semiotic world based on thriving forgery since day one, reality and fiction are no longer separate entities. Words falsify, and any book and any “Hotel Existence” is “built on a foundation of ‘just talk’” (Auster 2005a, 181). As Harry explains, the Hotel Existence was fantasized as a shelter for WWII orphans in the first place, and Tom, Nathan and Harry refer to their utopia as a linguistic construction. However, the word “just” keeps appearing throughout the novel and it has crucial consequences on the plot. Lucy's linguistic confusion with the word “just” in “just let him know that I'm okay, that I'm doing fine” (Auster 2005a, 270) turns out to be the reason for her unflinching silence, the central riddle of *The Brooklyn Follies*.

All those developments on the deceptive nature of language also point at the things that cannot be spoken, that defy our modes of representation. In *The Invention of Solitude*, Auster had reformulated Wittgenstein's concluding proposition of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) that excluded the unspeakable from the field of philosophy. What resists linguistic representation should be expressed differently. After refraining from quoting Wittgenstein as the foreword of “City of Glass” (Auster 1995, 110), Auster abides to Wittgenstein's principle by invoking in silence things that cannot be said. In *The Brooklyn Follies*, Nathan simply alludes to an anecdote about the philosopher's life without speaking about his work, hence avoiding the paradox of putting the unspeakable into words. What seems to be a trivial remark hides a key to the reading of the novel. Auster adheres to Wittgenstein's famous proposition by not mentioning it. Presence, absence, speech and silence guide the reader into the margins of language. Silence is a powerful tool to summon up what words cannot put across. During the ceremony held after Brightman's death, Tina Hott performs as a “faux-singer”:

He was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. [...] He had turned himself into an incarnation of absolute femininity, an idea of the

feminine that surpassed anything that existed in the realm of natural womanhood. [...] Tina's legs were so long and lovely to look at, it was impossible to believe that they were attached to a man.

But there was more to the effect she created [...] The inner light of the feminine was there as well. [...] All through the ceremony, she didn't say a word, standing among us in total silence. [...] This was how Tina Hott performed in her Saturday night cabaret appearances: not as a singer, but as a faux-singer, mouthing the words. [...] It was magnificent and absurd. It was funny and heartbreaking. It was moving and comical. It was everything it was and everything it wasn't. [...] It was one of the strangest, most transcendent moments of my life. (Auster 2005a, 222-3)

This passage has all the features of the grotesque we find in the overall novel and its "follies", but at the same time it is given an almost mystical depth. Tina is mouthing the words; she is pretending to pronounce them. No words are needed. When the narrator starts the next paragraph, the metamorphosis is completed, and the *he* is turned into a *she*. The fake woman has become the symbol of womanhood *par excellence*, the archetypal occurrence of the notion (it "surpassed anything that existed in the realm of natural womanhood"). Auster blurs the line between fake and original, reality and fiction, silence and speech. He evokes a certain creative purity without naming it, an un-say-able language as shapeless as the Word of God. Many characters who are estranged from language people the novel, such as Nathan's ex-wife "the now unmentionable one" who is later referred to as "(name deleted)" (Auster 2005a, 229, 230). Lucy—who etymologically brings the (mystical) light—is the best representative of this phenomenon. She embodies silence and exposes Nathan and Tom to the inefficiency of language when she refuses to speak:

I had been hoping to trick a few words out of her, but all I got were the same nods and shakes [...]. Strange unsettling little person. [...] We talked for a good thirty or forty minutes, but nothing came of it except ever-mounting confusion and worry. [...] Round and round we went, the two of us traveling in circles, talking, talking, talking, but unable to answer a single question. (Auster 2005a, 135-6)

The speech/silence duel between Nathan, Tom and Lucy recalls Derrida's deconstruction of Plato's *pharmakon* (Derrida 1972).<sup>10</sup> Language carries a useless leftover, it is a series of signs that do not mean so much as they are poisonous. Tina Hott is the personification of the *pharmakon*'s ambivalence as he/she is the center of all oppositions. The story of Freuchen's freezing breath (in "White Spaces") and the image of the "scarab devoured in the

sphere of his own dung" (in "Interior") were already heading toward this conception of language as both a cure and a poison. Language is not a conformal system of representation and the linguistic signs carry a dangerous supplement. This ambiguous leftover engenders negativity, fashions multiple readings and gives birth to poetic and literary games: words inside the word, books inside the book, and worlds inside the world.

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Auster explores the "limits of the known world" (Auster 1988, 98) through characters who undergo various forms of deprivation and who are almost reduced to nothingness, a concept which was already taking shape in his work of poetry. His poetry reformulates the tale of Creation by recounting the origins of nothingness ("And if nothing / then let nothing be" in "Gnomon", Auster 2004b, 128). The poems are flooded with "un-words" ("unpronounceable", "unsigned", "unquenchable", "unapproachable", "unknowable", "unland" echoing the collection *Unearth*—the word being used again in "Riding Eastward": "A word, unearthed"—"unappeasable", "unsspoken", "untellable", "unseen", "unborn", "unblessed", "undead") along with negations and the systematic repetition of words conveying nothingness: "never", "nowhere", "nothing", "to say nothing", "nothing but", "no more", "no home", "no meaning", "nothingness", "you will leave unsaid—and nothing / will be lost", and by extension "inaudible", "invisible", "irreducible". The climax is reached with "Impossible" surrounded by extra white spaces making the word pop out precisely in the middle of "Facing the Music".<sup>11</sup> "The list is inexhaustible" as Auster puts it in his latest novel *Invisible* (2009, 139), which is haunted by such "un-words" throughout. All these words carry their own erasure even though they paradoxically give birth to the poems, coming back to life from the edge of absence by a double negation ("as nothing / that will not haunt you" in "Aubade", Auster 2004b, 130), and in the introduction of "Wall Writing": "Nothing less than nothing. / In the night that comes / from nothing / for no one in the night / that does not come", Auster 2004b, 81).<sup>12</sup>

The upshot is the striking unification of these poems in the process (and I can't help assuming that this most French of American writers would have thought of "un", the French word for "one"). The poetic work thus finds its unity in *nothingness*,<sup>13</sup> a word about which Auster questions Edmond Jabès as follows:

PA: There are a dozen or so words and themes that are repeated constantly, on nearly every page of your work: desert, absence, silence, God,

nothingness, the void, the book, the word, exile, life, death... and it strikes me that each of these words is in some sense a word on the other side of speech, a kind of limit, something almost impossible to express.

EJ: Exactly. But at the same time, if these are things that cannot be expressed, they are also things that cannot be emptied of meaning. [...] God is perhaps a word without words. A word without meaning. And the extraordinary thing is that in the Jewish tradition God is invisible, and as a way of underscoring this invisibility, he has an unpronounceable name. What I find truly fantastic is that when you call something ‘invisible’, you are naming something, which means that you are almost giving a representation of the invisible. In other words, when you say ‘invisible,’ you are pointing to the boundary between the visible and the invisible; there are words for that. But when you can’t say the word, you are standing before nothing. And for me this is even more powerful because, finally, there is a visible in the invisible, just as there is an invisible in the visible. And this, this abolishes everything. (Auster 1990, 202-3)

Most of these words are repeated by Auster himself in his own work, especially *desert*, *absence*, *silence*, *invisible*, *God*, *nothingness*, *the book*, *the word*, *life* and *death*. Like Jabès, Auster is a secular Jewish author inspired by the Jewish tradition as if by intuition. In Norman Finkelstein’s words,

Auster is haunted by Jewish themes, and perhaps more importantly, by the Jewish attitude toward writing: to witness, to remember, to play divine and utterly serious textual games. (Finkelstein 1995, 49)

Auster’s mystical games with *logos* and chance, with the reading of clouds and weirdly connected events have kabalistic overtones. The invisible God of the Jews who “has an unpronounceable name” is presented in detail in “White Spaces”:

Each of the ninety-nine names tradition ascribes to this God was in fact nothing more than a way of acknowledging that-which-cannot-be-spoken, that-which-cannot-be-seen, and that-which-cannot-be-understood. (Auster 2004b, 157)

The poet’s concerns with the unspeakable and his games with the outside of language start to find their own voice, so to speak. YHWH is alluded to in “City of Glass”:

The last two letters remained: the ‘E’ and the ‘L’. Quinn’s mind dispersed. He arrived in a neverland of fragments, a place of wordless things and

thingless words. Then, struggling through his torpor one last time, he told himself that El was the ancient Hebrew for God. (Auster 1987, 71)

As Jabès scholars have noted, chiasm is a literary trope that enables him to evoke that-which-cannot-be-spoken, seen or understood. In his interview with Paul Auster, Jabès uses one of those in order to go beyond the limits of the say-able (“visible” / “invisible”). The young Auster was so influenced by Jabès that he articulated a chiasm that mirrors the irreducible difference between the linguistic sign and the tangible object (“wordless things and thingless words”) even if he had better leave it unsaid, as the mention of El implies.<sup>14</sup>

Following the example of Jabès, Auster works with the invisible and the incommunicable in order to exceed the limits of our modes of communication. For instance, Mark Brown explains that Quinn “anticipates the end of the notebook by exploring modes of representation that go beyond the visible inscriptions of writing” (2007, 45). Convincingly enough, the American hard-cover edition of Auster’s *Invisible* (Henry Holt) manages to represent the visible in the invisible as the invisible God’s omniscient eye and/or the poet’s “I”/eye are graphically embedded in the title. But there are unspeakable elements lurking under the smooth surface of the novels as well, not the infinite possibilities of the text nor what mystically stands outside the borders of speech and do not have any corresponding substantive, but what cannot be said because it is unnamable and inhuman, because it suggests that inhumanity is part of humanity.

The dead children. The children who will vanish, the children who are dead. Himmler: “I have made the decision to annihilate every Jew child from the face of the earth.” Nothing but pictures. Because, at a certain point, the words lead one to conclude that it is no longer possible to speak. Because these pictures are the unspeakable. (Auster 1988, 98)

Before *Oracle Night* (2004) and *Man in the Dark* (2008), Auster had written little about the Holocaust except for these early remarks in *The Invention of Solitude* and his commentaries on the works of post-holocaust writers. In his essay on Reznikoff’s *Holocaust* (1975), Paul Auster expresses dissatisfaction with this text, which was made out of the objective court reports of the Eichmann and Nuremberg trials. His criticism enables him to formulate his personal vision:



The Holocaust, which is precisely the unknowable, the unthinkable, requires a treatment beyond the facts in order for us to be able to understand it—assuming that such a thing is even possible. (Auster 1990, 224)

“A treatment beyond the facts” means using fiction and imagination. Death cannot be experienced nor put into words. But what happens when the living are no longer able to speak? According to Primo Levi and Giorgio Agamben, the “integral witness” of the Holocaust is the half human and half inhuman *muselmann*, a “living corpse” who was no longer able to testify. The Holocaust is a concrete proof of the inhuman which is now officially part of humanity. As Agamben explains, the *muselmann* is not only the limit between life and death but also the threshold between man and un-man. The frontier has been blurred, and witnessing and literature have gradually opened up to new terrifying modes of representation. Contrary to Reznikoff’s factual depiction of the Holocaust, Auster tentatively infuses his fiction with unspeakable horrors inspired from historical facts. *In the Country of Last Things* evokes the Holocaust and many horrible events that actually happened throughout the twentieth century. The unbearable inhuman visions such as the “ghost people” (Auster 1989, 11)—who are described in the exact same way as the *muselmann*, the “crematoria” (Auster 1989, 31, 17) and the human slaughterhouse Anna Blume is lured into, have been absent from Auster’s work for almost two decades. Uncertain hope seemed to come out of Anna’s discussions with the rabbi in the library. But now it is as if the terrorist attacks and repeated massacres in Yugoslavia had restarted nurturing Auster’s “writing of the disaster”.<sup>15</sup>

The Holocaust paradigm increasingly surfaces in Auster’s latest novels, starting with *Oracle Night*, which is haunted by Ed Victory’s testimony of the concentration camps. The story-within-the-story character Ed Victory is Nick Bowen’s new boss at the Bureau of Historical Preservation. As the narrator explains, his job is a “mad enterprise of collecting telephone books”, a way for Ed to “translate the experience of the death camp into an enduring lifelong action” (Auster 2004a, 93). Ed seems to be Nick’s spiritual guide, a contemporary “interpreter”, as he is “the man who was delivered to him by God” (Auster 2004a, 90). Like Christian in John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim Progress* (1678),<sup>16</sup> “Nick peers into the darkness before him, unable to see a thing” (Auster 2004a, 89) when they enter the bomb shelter. In the main narrative thread, John Trause (an anagram for Auster and a father-figure) is Sidney Orr’s interpreter. Sid’s “What do you think that means?” (Auster 2004a, 46) echoes Christian’s “What means this?” (Bunyan 1967 [1678], 28), but Trause makes fun of his apprenticeship: “It doesn’t mean a thing, Sid” (Auster

2004a, 46). Ed Victory uses allegorical pseudonyms ("*Lightning Man*, *New York*, and *Mr Goodshoes*", Auster 2004a, 96) and the main character's wife is called *Grace*. Auster hints at Bunyan's characters *Grace*, *Mr Worldly Wiseman* and *Goodwill* (the last being the name of the place where Nick bought his second-hand clothes). Contrary to Christian who is shown a portrait of the Christ holding "the best of books" in the House of the Interpreter (Bunyan 1967 [1678], 28), Bowen reads a Warsaw phone book<sup>17</sup> in the bomb shelter where Victory initiates him to a post-holocaust Godless world: "that was the end of mankind, Mr Good Shoes, God turned his eyes away from us and left the world forever" (Auster 2004a, 92). The story within the story ends when Nick is trapped in the bomb shelter. Auster's pastiche of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is made more obvious: "Although he doesn't believe in God, he tells himself that God is testing him—and that he mustn't fail to accept his misfortune with grace and equanimity of spirit" (Auster 2004a, 105). The bomb shelter symbolises a refuge to war disasters including Auschwitz, Hiroshima and the World Trade Center.

Auster has not written much about the September 11 attacks, and the end of *The Brooklyn Follies* is all the more striking as it gives an unexpected glimpse of the horror which is representative of the way the real attacks happened. It is conveyed through the singular point of view of a Brooklynite and his silence that go beyond the worldwide known images of the attacks, what Art Spiegelman<sup>18</sup> intended to do with his comic entitled *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004). Only two lines erase the three hundred pages of light humor and the dreams of the Hotel Existence. Nathan simply explains 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 2005a, 304), but he instantly goes back to his cheerful tone ("my friends") and talks about his greatest feeling of happiness. He is no longer able to speak of it. In *Man in the Dark*, Auster steps further in the representation of the unspeakable. August Brill imagines stories taking place in a divided America where the 9/11 attacks have never happened.<sup>19</sup> Katya, his granddaughter who is a cinema student, develops a little theory about silence and "inanimate objects as a means of expressing human emotions. That's the language of film", she concludes, insisting on the inappropriateness of verbalization: "without using a single word of dialogue. [...] No words. No words needed" (Auster 2008, 16, 21). Watching (silent) movies is the only way for Katya to cope with loss, which recalls Zimmer watching Hector Mann's silent films in *The Book of Illusions*.<sup>20</sup> The shocking death of Katya's boyfriend Titus, who was beheaded by terrorists, is pushed back until the end of the

novel. Like Nathan Glass in *The Brooklyn Follies*, August Brill “doesn’t want to go there” (Auster 2008, 2) and postpones the insufferable thought. The suspense occasioned by the repeated allusions to this unspeakable vision gives an unforgettable strength to the inhuman images that finally “drown in the fathomless hole of [our] eye” (Auster 2004b, 107). Titus is the embodiment of the line between human and inhuman as his head is chopped off from his body. He is “no longer quite human [...], a person and not a person” (Auster 2008, 176). The effect on the reader is indelible. The scene is highly visual. One of the terrorists precisely “stabs out the boy’s eyes” (Auster 2008, 176). Titus is now an un-man in the dark. He is defined in the same way as the *muselmann* was described by camp survivors.<sup>21</sup> Auster emphasizes the visual aspect of the unspeakable scene by referring to Titus as a “*nature morte*”, which harks back to the beginning of the novel when Brill makes an analogy between Titus and Rembrandt’s famous painting of his own son Titus “ravaged by illness” (Auster 2008, 176, 2).<sup>22</sup> By using the French term for still life (*nature morte*), Auster alludes to his friend Don DeLillo’s novel *Falling Man* (2007), published the year before. In this fiction about the 9/11 attacks, the narrator makes a digression about art and the unspeakable. He describes a character contemplating a painting by Giorgio Morandi which holds “a mystery she could not name”, and adds that it is a “*Natura Morta*. The Italian term for still life” (DeLillo 2007, 12).<sup>23</sup> The *nature morte* enables both Auster and DeLillo to express the inexpressible thanks to the sublime. Auster goes beyond the power of words by throwing these unbearable pictures at us. They are part of a silent web movie (“mercifully, there is no sound”, 2008, 175) which confirms that such events need not and cannot be put into words.

In Jabès’s view, the simple mention of the Holocaust, or by extension here, of terrorism, “tells the whole story” (Auster 1990, 202). No further comment is needed. A whole range of human emotions are instantly stirred by these notions. They are universal capitals on the map of human consciousness. The images of Titus’s death haunt the family members in silence, and they don’t want to discuss it. Even thinking about it is impossible: “You’re a brave girl, I said, suddenly thinking about Titus. / Stop it, Grandpa. I don’t want to talk about him” (Auster 2008, 18). Step by step, the narrator slowly comes to the point until his digressions bring us to a series of WWII stories. The first one deals with the rescue of a Jewish family who was about to be sent to a concentration camp. Another one recounts the torture of a Belgian prisoner in the death camps. Again, the atrocities are committed in silence: “the woman didn’t cry out, didn’t make a sound as one limb after another was pulled off her body” (Auster

2008, 121). Like Art Spiegelman and Elie Wiesel's families who were told about the death camps while they stayed in the ghettos and wouldn't take the stories for granted, Brill questions the veracity of the facts: "Is such a thing even possible?" (Auster 2008, 121) Unspeakable events are inhuman and as a matter of fact, unimaginable. The story teller loses the power of speech: "Jean-Luc couldn't look at us when he spoke the words. [...] He wasn't capable of talking" (Auster 2008, 121-2). During an interview with the French website *Rue89*,<sup>24</sup> Auster explained that all those digressions reflect August Brill's state of shock after seeing the pictures of Titus's murder. *Man in the Dark* is dedicated to Auster's friend David Grossman, whose son was actually killed by terrorists in Lebanon. The death of Titus illustrates the fact that Auster's imagination is overwhelmed by the darkness of the real. At the dawn of his literary career, Auster had visited Anne Frank's room in Amsterdam, and he wrote about this shattering experience in *The Invention of Solitude*:

As he stood in Anne Frank's room, the room in which the diary was written, [...] he suddenly found himself crying. Not sobbing, as might happen in response to a deep inner pain, but crying without sound, the tears streaming down his cheeks, as if purely in response to the world. It was at that moment, he later realized, that the Book of Memory began. As in the phrase: "she wrote her diary in this room". (Auster 1988, 83)

Auster presents literature as a way to testify and to cry for the world in silence. He notes that what he felt was not an inner pain but a rare moment of openness, a communion with the world. The visit of Anne Frank's room has epiphanic overtones. It is a new starting point in Auster's career. "The Book of Memory" is Auster's first successful attempt at desubjectivation, that is, writing about himself with a distance in the third person. This technique was inspired by Rimbaud's famous phrase "Je est un autre"—"I is another". The trip to Amsterdam marks the end of Auster's poetic aphasia and the beginning of his prolific dialogism, voicing such characters as Anna Blume, whose first name and writing-in-wartime activity recall the most famous child victim of the Holocaust. Speaking about Auster's characters, Mark Brown reminds us that

aphasia causes a disjunction in the mind of the sufferer between their experience of the world and their ability to deploy language to describe it. In short, words and things no longer correspond. (Brown 2007, 8)

It seems that Auster's inability to deploy language to describe his experience of the world, which was at the core of his early poems, paradoxically voiced

countless fictional writer-characters. In other words, it is precisely because things and words no longer correspond that Auster finds his place as a writer and speaks the unspeakable. The attacks on the WTC and the war on terror have unearthed Auster's ghosts. New unspeakable pictures of annihilation burn the writer's eyes. The fall of the towers have put the world into chaos. A linguistic profusion and confusion revives the ancient myth of Babel, as the numerous architectural metaphors suggest in *The Brooklyn Follies*.<sup>25</sup> According to Genesis, God punished men for their arrogance as they wanted to build a tower that would reach the sky. The connection with two of the world biggest *skyscrapers* is striking. One may wonder whether Jihadists wanted to inflict a holy punishment, assaulting the WTC as the symbol of capitalism and globalization. In the seventies, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard studied simulacra and claimed that the Twin Towers contemplated each other in their Siamese superiority and in this way abolished world concurrence, putting an end to the symbolic colonization of the sky. According to Baudrillard (1976), the Twin Towers used to symbolize "the death of the original and the end of representation", like Andy Warhol's serigraphy, like the thousands Al Wilsons and Gordon Dryer's fake Alec Smiths, like Paul Auster's name on the cover and in the fiction, like the two Stillmans, the real James Joyce and his homonymy ersatz, and the two Tituses. But what about the Twin Towers' destruction? The end of the end of representation, or in Art Spiegelman's view, a black-on-black picture?

In "The Art of Worry", Auster addresses the impossibility of picturing or writing about the Holocaust and the terrorist attacks on the WTC. The following excerpt reveals the importance of these historical events in Auster's eyes. In his work, they are synonymous with absence and silence, and yet they are artistically inspiring and ground-breaking:

Then came September 11, 2001. In the fire and smoke of three thousand incinerated bodies, *a holocaust was visited upon us*, and nine months later the city is still grieving over its dead. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, in the hours and days that followed that murderous morning, few of us were capable of thinking any coherent thoughts. The shock was too great, and as the smoke continued to hover over the city and we breathed the vile smells of death and destruction, most of us shuffled around like sleepwalkers, numb and dazed, not good for anything. But *The New Yorker* had an issue to put out, and when they realized that someone would have to design a cover—the most important cover in their history, which would have to be produced in record time—they turned to Spiegelman.

That black-on-black issue of September 24 is, in my opinion, Spiegelman's masterpiece. In the face of absolute horror, one's inclination is to dispense with images altogether. Words often fail us at moments of

extreme duress. The same is true of pictures. If I have not garbled the story Spiegelman told me during those days, I believe he originally resisted that iconoclastic impulse: to hand in a solid black cover to represent mourning, an absent image to stand as a mirror of the ineffable. [...] But still it wasn't enough. [...] Then, just as he was about to give up, he began thinking about some of the artists who had come before him, [...] in particular Ad Reinhardt and his black-on-black canvases from the sixties, those supremely abstract and minimal anti-images that had taken painting to the farthest edge of possibility. Spiegelman had found his direction. Not in silence—but in the sublime. You have to look very closely at the picture before you notice the towers. They are there and not there, effaced and yet still present, shadows pulsing in oblivion, in memory, in the ghostly emanation of some tormented afterlife. When I saw the picture for the first time, I felt as if Spiegelman had placed a stethoscope on my chest and methodically registered every heartbeat that had shaken my body since September 11. Then my eyes filled up with tears. Tears for the dead. Tears for the living. Tears for the abominations we inflict on one another, for the cruelty and savagery of the whole stinking human race. (Auster 2003, 462-3, emphasis added)

This passage is Auster's most explicit mention of the delocalization of the Holocaust trauma. He finds himself crying again in a way that silently echoes the visit of Anne Frank's room in *The Invention of Solitude*. Auster describes the 9/11 attacks as the "holocaust" re-"visited", in other words an occurrence, a re-presentation of the Holocaust.<sup>26</sup> Spiegelman draws a similar parallel between Auschwitz and 9/11 in *The Shadow of No Towers*. After Auster in "The Book of Memory", Spiegelman concedes that he can only write about himself in the third person when it comes to the immediate aftermath of the trauma (Spiegelman 2004, 8). Like Titus whose eyes are stabbed out, Spiegelman's self-portrait is red-eyed as the incandescent towers prevent him from seeing and drawing anything else. Representation, be it visual or linguistic, is taken to the "farthest edge of possibility" (Auster 2003, 463) by contemporary artists such as Auster and Spiegelman. But what happens when one stands in front of the unimaginable, the unspeakable, the un-presentable? Auster seems to go some way towards answering these questions here. As it is no longer possible to speak, the contemporary artist will have to find new modes of representation to cope with a reality that goes out of control and hinders rational thinking. Speaking of the inhuman scenes of *In the Country of Last Things*, Auster had told Joseph Mallia that "reality is far more terrible than anything we can imagine" (1995, 115). In his overall oeuvre, reality and fiction are unstable categories and metalepsis is often used to render the unreal aspects of life. Reality interferes with the fiction just as

unimaginable things happen in the world. Evoking Borges as Auster would, Baudrillard considers the attacks on the WTC as “a fiction beyond fiction” (in “The Spirit of Terrorism”, 2001). Since “White Spaces” and *The Invention of Solitude*, Paul Auster has never stopped trying to exceed “the limits of the known world” (Auster 1988, 98) in order to discover “some terrible, unimagined truth” (Auster 2004b, 159). Hell is a human invention. It is less frightening than reality. No wonder that God left the world. As Auster implored in “Hieroglyph”, “Do not / emerge, Eden. Stay / in the mouths of the lost / who dream you” (Auster 2004b, 86).

At the center of his latest novel *Invisible*, Auster invites us to think the unthinkable by speaking of an unspeakable taboo. After “City of Glass” and *The Brooklyn Follies*, *Invisible*’s New York is once again a new Garden of Eden, a Promised Land where Adam Walker and his sister Gwynn commit “a monumental transgression” (Auster 2009, 144). For a while they are “the last two people left in the universe” (Auster 2009, 146), and their father addresses Adam as “Son, as in my son, my creation, my heir” (Auster 2009, 151), all of which depict a pre-lapsarian Adamic setting. Contrary to Cormac Mc Carthy’s incestuous couple in *Outer Dark* (1968), they make love every day for several weeks using contraceptives and consequently “the unmentionable will never come to pass” (Auster 2009, 146). The narrator can only speak the unspeakable with a distance between him and himself, here thanks to the second person narrative, forty years after the facts:

You and your sister never talk about what you are doing. You don’t even have a conversation to discuss why you don’t talk about it. You’re living in the confines of a shared secret, and the walls of that space are built by silence, an insane silence that can be broken only at the risk of bringing those walls down upon your heads. (Auster 2009, 150)

This coming-of-age novel is composed of four parts alternating between present and past tenses, first, second and third person narratives. Again, Auster focuses on the questions that haunt him. A thorough scientific discussion on aphasia is even reported (Hélène Juin is a “speech pathologist”, Auster 2009, 196-7). The three parts of Adam’s memoir—“Spring”, “Summer” and “Autumn”, respectively written in the first, second and third person—are edited and published by the narrator, Walker’s old college friend. After hinting at his own experimentation in desubjectivation,<sup>27</sup> Auster takes the poet Adam Walker one step further. Following a narrative logic that embraces nothingness, “Winter” remains untold. As his name implies, Adam is the first man, but at the end of his life, after having drifted from first to second and third person, the poet’s

desubjectivation is complete through death. The missing chapter stands for the unspeakable point of view of the non-person. Just like Rilke and Blanchot before him, Auster is fascinated by the limits of human experience, and blurs the line between life and death, inner and outer,<sup>28</sup> person and non-person, reality and fiction. In *The Brooklyn Follies*, *Man in the Dark* and *Invisible*, Auster conveys the speakable and the unspeakable in the same piece. Just as “there is a visible in the invisible” (Auster 1990, 202), there is a speakable in the unspeakable.

Towards the end of *Invisible*, the narrator meets the aging Gwynn who tells him that she did not commit that “monumental transgression” with her brother. It is then impossible for the reader to decide whether Walker's book is a memoir or a work of fiction. The narrator finally explains that everything we have been reading was transformed and altered for privacy purposes. The fact of the matter is that no integral witness will be heard, as human beings are bound to subjectivity. Although the writer leaves the world unsaid, he does not leave it unchanged. In Auster's semiotic world, each and every interconnected event involves the participation of language, imagination, memory and chance in the creation of the real.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Reference to all poems by Paul Auster: *Collected Poems*, 2004b.

<sup>2</sup> I translated the interview which was conducted in French.

<sup>3</sup> “Language is not experience, it is a means of organizing experience” (Auster 2004b, 204).

<sup>4</sup> “I remain in the room in which I am writing this. I put one foot in front of the other. I put one word in front of the other, and for each step I take I add another word, as if for each word to be spoken there were another space to be crossed, a distance to be filled by my body as it moves through this space” (Auster 2004b, 158-9). In *Travels in the Scriptorium*, Mr Blank paces back and forth in a room and he only travels thanks to his imagination and his poor memory. *Man in the Dark* begins in a similar way as August Brill, an old man in a wheelchair, imagines stories when he cannot sleep.

<sup>5</sup> This early conception of metropolitan loneliness is acknowledged by Paul Karasik who pictures Quinn—the main character of “City of Glass”—disappearing with the stones of a wall in his graphic novel adaptation (Auster 2004d, 111).

<sup>6</sup> In fact Auster started working on *In the Country of Last Things* “back in the days when [he] was a college student” (Auster 1995, 114).

<sup>7</sup> The phrase “the word *something*” is systematically used (with italics) to debate the accuracy of certain words in *Travels in the Scriptorium* (“the word *all* is an absolute term”, Auster 2006, 22). The same pattern is used in *The Book of Illusions* (2002) and *Man in the Dark*, and again it calls the reader’s attention towards word choice. It unveils the writing process and it points at the inadequacy of language which becomes an unstable referential system.

<sup>8</sup> Contrary to the well known Irish author, Auster’s James Joyce is an insignificant character in *The Brooklyn Follies*.

<sup>9</sup> Since Auster invites us to find hidden meanings in the characters’ names, we could read Alex Smith as *Al-Ex-Myth*, in other words an *Al* (one of the “thousand[s] Al Wilsons” [Auster 2005a, 163] from the crowds of fakes buried in “unmarked grave[s]”, a “Mr Nobody” from “City of Glass” or *The Book of Illusions*), a nameless dead character (an *exX*—“Mr. X” is actually the name Born chooses for his fake biography at the end of *Invisible*, Auster 2009, 302-4), and an extremely talented artist who has actually never existed (a *myth*). The “unmarked grave”—which is mentioned by Aurora and then by Tom when he speaks of Poe’s death (2005a, 150, 273)—alludes to the anonymous metropolitan death as it was

described by Musil in *The Man without Qualities* (1930-1942). Moreover it is connected to the title of the last chapter “X marks the spot” which focuses on the attacks on the targeted World Trade Center (through the eyes of the unnoticed Nathan Glass, whose new project is to write the biographies of the anonymous dead). Ground Zero is implicitly referred to as a *mass grave*.

<sup>10</sup> The Greek term *pharmakon* can either mean “cure” or “poison”. According to Derrida (1972), the *pharmakon* is an outside element which forces a living creature to be connected to a fellow creature, risking an allergic pain in the process. This is precisely how language is presented in *The Brooklyn Follies*. This ambivalence appears in Auster’s overall work, in which language can alternately be a curse or a blessing.

<sup>11</sup> Here is a complete reference list of “un-words” and additional words of nothingness taken from Auster’s *Collected Poems*, 2004b: “unleashed” (“Spokes”, 25, “Late Summer”, 98), “unlike” (“Spokes”, 30), “unsprung” (“Spokes”, 32), “unseen” (“Unearth”, 37, “Search for a Definition”, 145, “White Spaces”, 159), “unwritten” (“Unearth”, 38), “unquelled” (“Unearth”, 42), “unraveled” (“Unearth”, 47, “Hieroglyph”, 86), “unaborted” (“Unearth”, 49), “unpronounceable” (“Unearth”, 56), “unborn” (“Unearth”, 57, “Search for a Definition”, 146), “unsigned” (“Matrix and Dream”, 66), “unspoken” (“Interior”, 67), “unapproachable” (“Lies. Decrees. 1972.”, 73, “Northern Lights”, 125), “unwitnessed” (“Lies. Decrees. 1972.”, 73), “undyingly” (“Lies. Decrees. 1972.”, 73), “unquenchable” (“Prism”, 80), “unknowable” (“Ascendant”, 89, “White Spaces”, 157), “unbrokenly” (“Heraclitian”, 99), “undeciphered” (“Disappearances”, 107), “unland” (“Reminiscence of Home”, 126), “unearthed” (“Riding Eastward”, 127), “unsaid” (“Aubade”, 130, “Narrative”, 143), “unappeasable” (“Meteor”, 133), “untellable” (“Siberian”, 135), “unfallen” (“Narrative”, 143), “unblessed” (“Between the Lines”, 147), “undead” (“Bedrock”, 149), “unpronounceable” (“White Spaces”, 157), “unimagined” (“White Spaces”, 159), “nothing” (“Spokes”, 24, “Unearth”, 37, 38, 48, 55, “White Nights”, 65, “Fore Shadows”, 78, “Wall Writing”, 81, “Covenant”, 83, “Song of Degrees”, 94, “Autobiography of the Eye”, 102, “Disappearances”, 107, 111, 112, “Gnomon”, 128, “Aubade”, 130, “Quarry”, 138, “Credo”, 141, “Narrative”, 143, “Search for a Definition”, 145, 146, “Facing the Music”, 151, 152, “White Spaces”, 155, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161), “nothing left” (“Incendiary”, 93), “nothing but” (“Fragment from Cold”, 129, “Facing the Music”, 150), “nothing more” (“Lackawanna”, 72, “Viaticum”, 76, “White Spaces”, 157), “never” (“Unearth”, 39, 53, 56, “White Nights”, 65, “Scribe”, 69, “Heraclitian”, 99, “Effigies”, 118, “Quarry”, 138, “Obituary in the Present Tense”, 142, 143, “Search for a Definition”, 145, “Facing the Music”, 150, “White Spaces”, 157, 158, 159), “not even” (“Unearth”, 58, “Interior”, 67, “Aubade”, 130), “nowhere” (“Unearth”, 61, “Wall Writing”, 81, “Disappearances”, 108, 110, 113, “Facing the Music”, 151, “White Spaces”, 158), “no one” (“White Nights”, 65, “Fore-Shadows”, 78, “White Spaces”, 156), “no one’s voice” (“Unearth”, 60), “no one’s flesh” (“Transfusion”, 134), “no longer” (“White Nights”, 65, “Matrix and Dream”, 66, “Lackawanna”, 72, “Fire Speech”, 96, “Braille”, 100, “Testimony”, 131, “White Spaces”, 155), “no more” (“Obituary in the Present Tense”, 142, “S.A. 1911-1979”, 144, “Search

for a Definition", 145), "no less" (Obituary in the Present Tense", 142), "none" (Obituary in the Present Tense", 142), "no home" ("Facing the Music", 151), "no farther" ("White Spaces", 157), "no room" ("White Spaces", 161), "no name" ("White Spaces", 158), "no names" ("Interior", 67), "no meaning" ("S.A. 1911-1979", 144), "no memory" ("White Spaces", 155), "no importance" ("White Spaces", 160), "no room" ("White Spaces", 161), "nothingness" ("Visible", 132, "Notes from a Composition Book", 205), "to say nothing" ("Unearth, 37), "to be nothing" ("Disappearances", 109), "invisible" ("Unearth", 49, "Wall Writing", 81, "Autobiography of the Eye", 102, "Effigies", 121, "Narrative", 143, "Search for a Definition", 146, "White Spaces", 157), "invisibly" ("White Spaces", 159), "inaccessible" ("Unearth", 50), "inaudible" ("Matrix and Dream", 66), "illegible" ("Disappearances", 108), "impossible" ("Effigies", 118, "Facing the Music", 151), "impossibility" ("White Spaces", 157), "irreducible" ("Bedrock", 149), "ineffable" ("Notes from a Composition Book", 205).

<sup>12</sup> In *Invisible*, "true" and "untrue" tend to overlap. Most landmarks are finally erased and they end up in a double negation ("the remarks about Dante's *Inferno* on the first page of this book were not in not-Walker's original manuscript", Auster 2009, 260).

<sup>13</sup> Auster's heroes are zeros. Let us consider Owen Brick and Nick Bowen, the anagramic heroes of *Man in the Dark* and *Oracle Night*'s stories within the story. In the light of the poetic work, the first is a stone in the wall, but he is also emptied out by his own name which reads "new O" backwards (he has fallen into a "cylindrical hole" which forms a "perfect circle", not to mention the "double knot" which laces his boots, Auster 2008, 3). As for Nick Bowen, it reads "new o B", which makes sense if we follow the reversed order of publication. *The Brooklyn Follies*' *Uncle Nat* ("Un"/"Not") could also be seen as a personification of Auster's "unity in nothingness".

<sup>14</sup> One can also read the silent connection between "City of Glass" and Auster's essay on Jabès entitled "Book of the Dead", in which he notes that the last book of the *Book of Questions* is called *El* (Auster 2003, 367). In *The Brooklyn Follies*, Nathan Glass—New York is the city of *Glass*—speaks of "the book of the living" (Auster 2005a, 9). Like *Oracle Night* and *Travels in the Scriptorium*, Jabès's *The Book of Questions* is the title of the book inside the book. The narrator appropriates the name of one of the characters (Yukel), which is similar to Auster's use of his own name in "City of Glass".

<sup>15</sup> In *The Brooklyn Follies*, Nathan's dark considerations on Yugoslavia are a common *delocalization* of the trauma of the Holocaust and an illustration of what Blanchot (1980) called the "writing of the disaster." Another instance is the anti-atomic shelter, the concentration camp stories and Sidney Orr's need to write in reaction to a sordid newspaper article that represents "the end of mankind" in *Oracle Night* (2004a, 105). As for the non-fictional world, Paul Auster—who is a third generation Jewish American from an unscathed family—finally enabled Hilton Obenzinger to publish Zosia Goldberg's Holocaust memoirs after several years of repeated efforts. In the introduction, Auster mentions the "unspeakable horrors" Zosia went through (Auster 2004c, xvii).

<sup>16</sup> In *The Pilgrim Progress*, Christian flees from the City of Destruction and goes on an allegorical journey to the Celestial City. His spiritual guide is called the Interpreter. The main paradox of Bunyan's story is the fact that Christian leaves his family behind in order to achieve his spiritual goal. In *Oracle Night*, it is also the starting point of the story of Nick Bowen who simply walks out of his marriage one night, never to return.

<sup>17</sup> During the Saint Malo Festival (2005), Auster explained that the phone book—whose cover appears in *Oracle Night* (Auster 2004a, 113)—was actually given to him by his Hungarian editor.

<sup>18</sup> In “The Art of Worry”, his preface for a 2003 Spiegelman exhibition, Auster praises the author of *Maus*, “the brilliant two-volume narrative of his father’s nightmare journey through the camps in the Second World War” (Auster 2003, 458). Spiegelman also wrote the introduction—entitled “Picturing a glassy-eyed private I”—to the graphic novel adaptation of “City of Glass” (Auster 2004d).

<sup>19</sup> In a 2002 article entitled “NYC=USA”, Auster states that he thought about the “possibility of New York seceding from the Union and establishing itself as an independent city-state” (Auster 2003, 510). This fantasy is the initial situation of August Brill’s story in *Man in the Dark*. This piece, along with “Random Notes—September 11, 2001—4:00 PM” (Auster 2003, 505-6) and *Manhattan, Ground Zero: A Sonic Memorial Soundwalk* (Auster 2005b) all bear witness to the 9/11 attacks.

<sup>20</sup> *The Book of Illusions* is a meditation on loss which was published one year after September 11, 2001. In “NYC=USA”—written on July 31, 2002, and first published in *The New York Times* on September 9, 2002, that is to say at the time *The Book of Illusions* was published—Auster makes the following remark on 9/11: “we experienced that day as a *family tragedy*. Most of us went into a state of *intense mourning*, and we *dragged ourselves around* in the days and months that followed engulfed by a sense of *communal grief*” (Auster 2003, 509, emphasis added). For chronological reasons (in both real and fictional time), reading *The Book of Illusions* as Auster’s first fictional reaction to the national tragedy is arguable. Even if it is set in the 1980’s, the initial situation of the novel strongly resonates with “NYC=USA”. After losing his entire *family* in a *plane crash*, the narrator David Zimmer is “*wandering around* the house” and even speaks of “*communal mourning*” (Auster 2002, 7, emphasis added). Throughout the novel, the words “plane”, “jump” and “crash” are often repeated, and most of all, “the word *fall*” (Auster 2002, 200). A list of plant names (“a random collection of syllables from a dead language”) features “Fall panicum” (Auster 2002, 295, 296). It alludes to Zimmer’s panic in the aftermath of the plane crash (he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and cannot take a plane without his Xanax pills). In the first phase of his mourning, he plays with his dead kids’ toys: “as I [...] played with their Lego pieces, *building ever more complex and baroque structures*, I felt that I was temporarily inhabiting them again—carrying on their little phantom lives for them by repeating the gestures they had made when they still had bodies” (Auster 2002, 7-8, emphasis added). This passage could be read as a *mise en*

*abyme* of absence and memorial at Ground Zero and of the (re)building of the WTC. But this hidden subtext remains uncertain and unsaid. Indeed, silence is central to *The Book of Illusions*. Zimmer overcomes his unspeakable sorrow thanks to Hector Mann's silent films and his mustache, "a metaphysical jump rope" which "speaks a language without words" (Auster 2002, 29).

<sup>21</sup> The chopped head is a recurrent motif in *The Book of Illusions* and *Invisible*.

<sup>22</sup> Auster speaks about Rembrandt's son Titus before drawing his conclusion on the "dead children" as the "pictures" of "the unspeakable" in "The Book of Memory" (Auster 1988, 97-8).

<sup>23</sup> Contrary to *Falling Man*, which puts the reader in the ashes of 9/11 right from the opening sentence, the unspeakable events are first circumvented in *The Brooklyn Follies* and *Man in the Dark*. Both Auster and DeLillo represent the unspeakable trauma thanks to a still life. Like August Brill and Katya who cannot get rid of the image of Titus's chopped head, Martin and Lianne "keep seeing the towers in [Morandi's] still life" (DeLillo 2007, 49): "Two of the taller items were dark and somber, with smoky marks and smudges, and one of them was partly concealed by a long-necked bottle. The bottle was a bottle, white. The two dark objects, too obscure to name, were the things that Martin was referring to. "What do you see?" he said. She saw what he saw. She saw the towers" (DeLillo 2007, 49). Such projective visions are symptomatic of post-traumatic stress disorder.

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x82mgl\\_paul-auster-sur-rue89-linterview-in\\_creation](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x82mgl_paul-auster-sur-rue89-linterview-in_creation) (January 6, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Tom gave up his thesis entitled "Imaginary Edens: The Life of the Mind in Pre-Civil War America" (Auster 2005a, 14). *The Brooklyn Follies* is about the life of the mind in Pre-War on Terror America, and the title of Tom's thesis echoes Stillman's: "The Garden and the Tower: Early Visions of the New World", composed of two parts: "The Myth of Paradise" and "The Myth of Babel." Thoreau's *Walden* and the utopia of the "Hotel Existence"—both described as a "sanctuary" (Auster 2005a, 16, 189)—are central references, along with Brightman's Attic, which is a "paradise of tranquility and order" (57), but ends up in failure. All of which questions the modernist conception of art as a redemptory refuge and leads us to the final scene of the 9/11 attacks.

<sup>26</sup> We may also note that when the phrase "smoke of three thousand incinerated bodies" (Auster 2003, 462) is repeated at the end of *The Brooklyn Follies* (Auster 2005a, 304), the word "incinerated" hints at the Holocaust without naming it.

<sup>27</sup> "By writing about myself in the first person, I had smothered myself and made myself invisible. [...] I became *He*..." (Auster 2009, 89).

<sup>28</sup> When Nathan Glass testifies of his mystical near-death experience in *The Brooklyn Follies*, he finds himself "nowhere", i.e., "inside myself and outside myself at the same time" (Auster 2005a, 297). This chapter ("Inspiration") silently pays homage to Blanchot's "L'inspiration" (1955, 211-48), a study of death as the unknowable and unsayable "other side" of human experience. For further reading on the unspeakable, see also Blanchot's *Death Sentence* (1948), which is quoted by Auster in *The Invention of Solitude*: "'What is extraordinary begins at the moment I stop. But I am no longer able to speak of it'" (Auster 1988, 63).