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Diaspora re-writing in the works of secular Jewish-American writers Paul Auster and Jerome Rothenberg

François Hugonnier (University of Paris X-Nanterre)

All poets are Jews.
—Marina Tsvetaeva¹

Paying homage to their “fellow poet” and “brother” Edmond Jabès, Paul Auster and Jerome Rothenberg both remind us that “the difficulty of being Jewish [...] is the same as the difficulty of writing. For Judaism and writing are but the same waiting, the same hope, the same wearing out”.² Most Jewish-American writers feel alienated and belong nowhere, except, perhaps, in the Book. “Finally”, as Auster boldly claimed during a conference on “Secular Jewish Culture / Radical Poetic Practice”, it could also mean that “Judaism, at its essence, is a religion for atheists”.³ These secular Jewish-American writers are inscribed in the Jewish tradition as if by intuition. While 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), Rothenberg also insists on the “playfulness” that is involved in his “Jewish vaudeville.” But sometimes, as Rothenberg told me, Diaspora writing forces the comic to “drop out”.⁴ Paul Auster and Jerome Rothenberg both started as poets, essayists and editors under the influence of post-Holocaust Jewish writers, and their contribution to Diaspora literature began with the diffusion of Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan’s poetry. They followed their invisible path across the desert and returned to the silence where everything had originally come from—to find a *poetics* of their own. Alternating between works of poetry, anthology, criticism and fiction, their full careers have developed into different fashions,⁵ but both of them greatly contribute to a secular re-writing of the Jewish Diaspora.

At the dawn of his literary career, Auster wrote several essays on Diaspora writers, in which he considers Celan⁶ as “a poet of exile, an outsider even to the language of his own poems” (“The Poetry of Exile”, Auster 2003, 351), and praises Jabès’s “poetics of absence” (Auster 2003, 372). Rothenberg also wrote several essays and commentaries on Jabès and Celan⁷, and as one of the world’s leading anthologists, he has widely represented the work of these Diaspora writers in his anthologies, including *Poems for the Millennium* (1998), *A Book of the Book* (2000), and most specifically *A Big Jewish Book* (1978) and its condensed and

rearranged version *Exiled in the Word* (1989). Here is an excerpt from Rothenberg's preface to *A Big Jewish Book* in which he explains some of the "topics & conflicts, tensions" that hold him to the "Jewish work":

- a sense of exile both as cosmic principle (exile of God from God, etc) & as the Jewish fate, experienced as the alienation of group & individual, so that the myth (Gnostic or orthodox) is never only symbol but history, experience, as well;
- from which there comes a distancing from nature & from God (infinite, ineffable), but countered in turn by a *poesis* older than the Jews, still based on namings, on a imaging of faces, bodies, powers, a working out of possibilities (but, principally, the female side of God—Shekinah—as Herself in exile) evaded by orthodoxy, now returning to astound us;
- or, projected into language, a sense (in Jabès's phrase) of being "exiled in the word"—a conflict, as I read it, with a text, a web of letters, which can capture, captivate, can force the mind toward abstract pattern or, conversely, toward the framing, raising, of an endless, truly Jewish "book of questions";
- &, finally, the Jews identified as mental rebels, who refuse consensus, thus become—even when bound to their own Law, or in the face of "holocaust", etc.—the model for the Great Refusal to the lie of Church & State.

And it's from such a model—however obscured by intervening degradations from *poesis*, impulse to conform, etc.—that I would understand Marina Tsvetayeva's dictum that "all poets are Jews." (Rothenberg 1981, 122-123)

In his notes on "Secular Jewish Culture / Radical Practice" Rothenberg quotes this passage and explains that Tsvetaeva's phrase is taken from "her poem 'Poem of the End,' later quoted by Paul Celan in the Cyrillic epigraph to his own poem 'Und mit dem Buch aus Tarussa' and by me in *A Big Jewish Book*." Rothenberg claims that "[he] saw [him]self—then as now—not writing in a specifically Jewish context for a Jewish audience, as such, but opening the Jewish mysteries to all who wanted them" (Rothenberg 2008, 54).

Auster and Rothenberg's own poems also allude to, or borrow from these Diaspora poets. Rothenberg was the first English language translator of Paul Celan⁸, and Paul Auster conducted a long interview with Edmond Jabès at his translator Rosmarie Waldrop's house in Providence, Rhode Island. As Auster explains in his essay on *The Book of Questions*, Jabès's "sense of exile" was born after the Suez Crisis of 1956, when he was

forced by Nasser's regime to leave Egypt and resettle in France. [...] Until then, his Jewishness had been nothing more than a cultural fact. [...] But now that he had been made to suffer for no other reason than that he was a Jew, he had become the Other, and this sudden sense of exile was transformed into a basic, metaphysical self-description. [...] More than the primary source of the Torah, it was the writings and rabbinical commentaries of the Diaspora that moved Jabès, and he began to see in these books a strength particular to the Jews, one that translated itself, almost literally, into a mode of survival. [...] For Jabès, this meant that the Book had taken on all the weight and importance of a homeland. (Auster 2003, 368)

Jabès, Celan, Kafka or Reznikoff embody the Jewish writer as “wanderer”, to such an extent that it goes beyond any question of language and nationality. Accordingly, Rothenberg states that “‘Jewish American’ was of far less concern to [him] than ‘Jewish,’ which in itself was international in scope” (Rothenberg 2008, 59). By building a “nomadic poetics” shared with his “brother-in-arms” Pierre Joris (Rothenberg 2008, 60), Rothenberg tends to express a universal sense of exile and otherness:

As supreme wanderers—even before & after the forced diaspora—the Jews’ historical & geographical range has been extraordinary. To map this in “a big Jewish book,” I have included works from the ancient Jewish languages—Hebrew & Aramic—& from those of Yiddish & Ladino developed in the course of the exile, as well as from other languages (Greek, Spanish, Arabic, German, English, Persian, French, etc.) used by Jews in Biblical & post-Biblical times. But I have been impressed as well by the continuity of a specifically Hebrew poetry which, far from being stifled in the aftermath of “Bible,” has produced a series of new forms & visualizations, the diversity of which is in itself a matter of much wonder. (Preface to *A Big Jewish Book*, in Rothenberg 1981, 124)

In this preface, Rothenberg thus explains that he has tried to “break new ground” by including “non-canonical & heretical texts” (125), “kabbala” (126), “previously downgraded figures” (126) and “the work of later Jewish poets, even where it develops into an apparently ‘anti-Jewish’ point of view” by the likes of Stein, Zukofsky, Ginsberg, Mac Low. Thanks to a double movement—“making it new” while at the same time going back to the roots of poetry and Judaism—Rothenberg has played a fundamental role in the re-evaluation of mostly unknown *outsider* forms of Jewish and non-Jewish poetry, which could paradoxically be

considered as Diaspora writing *par excellence*. When I asked Rothenberg about the process of putting *A Big Jewish Book* together, he told me that

when I [...] made a first collection from what I had at hand, I had only a very tentative idea of what there was that I wanted to make apparent, and then I began to look for further instances, anywhere and everywhere I could find them. I was surprised to find works and concepts that I hadn't expected to find, including gematria.

Rothenberg considers his work of poetry and anthology as “all part of one project”. Indeed, *A Big Jewish Book* is a compilation of new techniques that allowed Rothenberg to write groundbreaking poetry composed of experimental *midrash* and kabalistic rhyming of his own, including *Vienna Blood & Other Poems* (1980) and of course, *Gematria* (1990). In *Vienna Blood*, Rothenberg toys with diasporic representations of the Jews (in “The adventures of the Jew”), and with ancestral Jewish mysticism—which he considers as “the richest source for a poetics” (Rothenberg 2008, 57)—in such poems as “Aleph Poem”, “Numerology” and “Abulafia’s circles” (Rothenberg 1980). Since *Technicians of the Sacred* (1968), Rothenberg’s poetry has drawn from many different voices, but in Christine A. Meilicke’s words, his “Jewish voice emerges from the diaspora. It grows out of the awareness of being in exile” (Meilicke 2005, 19). The following passage, taken from his recent postface to *Tryptich* (2007), shows the significance of the notion of Diaspora in his life and work:

The word *diaspora* arises in my mind, triggers a series of connections to which I had been late in coming, & colors the range of these poems as I now look back at them. That is what makes a *postface*, the chance to remember for myself what no one else can think or say for me. I am among the dispersed, the dispossessed—like all of us—not from any particular homeland but feeling the scattering-abroad inside me, the meaning of *diaspora* coursing through my veins. Along with that—as it did for our friend & brother-poet Edmond Jabès—the word Jew came out of the depths, where it had lain hidden, some three or four decades ago. In 1967, following an interview with Paul Celan (...), I felt a rush of words & images (spent images, I thought) that wove themselves around a distant Poland peopled by Jewish specters that I first imagined & then fleshed out from others’ memories and writings. [...] I was deeply aware of *holocaust* but almost never spoke of it as such, knowing that I had it anyway & that I couldn’t dislodge it as a hidden subtext. Another subtext, coming to surface in my mind, was a running translation into Yiddish—not a real translation but a pretended voicing in which I dreamed of myself as “the last Yiddish poet.” (Rothenberg 2007, 221)

Triptych is composed of *Poland/1931* (1974)—a half historical, half fictional exploration of his Jewish-American origins, *Khurbn* (1989)—the title is the Yiddish word for “disaster”, and *The Burning Babe* (2001-6), which was written in the aftermath of 9/11. In these “investigative” poems, he uses “the words of true witnesses, mixed with [his] own” (Rothenberg 2007). In *Khurbn*, Rothenberg speaks the unspeakable by giving voice to the victims of the Holocaust. “14 Stations” (in Rothenberg 1996) complements these experimentations. It is a series of poems made out of a chance operation technique derived from kabalistic numerology (*gematria*) in order to match Arie Galles’s monumental charcoal drawings based on the aerial photos of World War II extermination camps. In addition to his anthologies, Rothenberg’s poems shed new light on the role of the writer as a witness, a storyteller and trickster who translates many voices (through his subjective anthological selections, his poetic dialogism and mystical games). Paraphrasing Tristan Tzara, Rothenberg explains that “[He is] more and more interested in the fact that there are others who came before [him]”. In other words, he provides a necessary and global re-shaping of Diaspora literature.

The fragments of Auster’s diasporic writing are scattered in his overall oeuvre, spanning four decades, but contrary to Rothenberg’s work, these fragments are to be found between the lines, in the unsaid, which I consider to be Auster’s real *tour de force*. His early work is infused with Jabès’s metaphysical writing of exile, starting with his first poems and the edition of his poetry magazine *Living Hand* (1973), featuring poems by Auster, Jabès and Celan. In *Unearth* (1974), his collection of poems written between 1970 and 1972, Auster struggles with naming. Naming is next to impossible as the poet tries to speak the unspeakable. He feels alienated by the inadequacy of language: “You ask / words of me, and I / will speak them—from the moment / I have learned / to give you nothing” (Auster 2004, 48). However, language is the only unstable moving ground for the writer to rest on: “You will build / your house here—you will forget / your name. Earth / is the only exile” (Auster 2004, 42). Like his mentor Edmond Jabès, the young Auster is a “Nomad” (Auster 2004, 61), a poet exiled in the word: “wherever you move, the desert / is new, / is moving with you” (Auster 2004, 61). These concluding lines from the last *Unearth* poem were chosen by Auster as a transition with the next poetry sample in *Living Hand*, which happens to be *The Book of Questions* by Edmond Jabès. Jabès influenced Auster’s debut as a writer of silence and a maker of *unwords*. The title of the collection *Unearth* underlines the poet’s attempt at naming

his own alienation. The following conversation, which is a key to a better understanding of Auster's career as a novelist, is taken from Auster's interview with Edmond Jabès:

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)

Throughout his career, Auster has repeated some of these words (as the title of his novel *Invisible* [2009] exemplifies) to create his own poetics of absence. As Norman Finkelstein explains in his introduction to Auster's *Collected Poems*, his "solitary voice speak[s] to the silence. It is a silence that itself has a complex history, often connected to some of the most terrible episodes in modern times" (Finkelstein 2004, 16-17). Finkelstein also notes that "White" was written "in memory of Celan", and he insists on "Ascendant" and its "powerfully confident appropriations of Jewish tradition" (Finkelstein 2004, 15). The complex history of Auster's silence goes back to Genesis and the *confusio linguarum*, to YHWH's unpronounceable name, and it is often linked to the limitations of language, to Wittgenstein's mysticism, and, as a constant subtext, to the unspeakable war horrors of the Holocaust,⁹ the atomic bomb and the attacks on the World Trade Center. After being outlined in his little metaphysical treaty *White Spaces* (1980), which he retrospectively considers as "the bridge between writing poetry and writing prose" (Auster 1995, 132), Auster's meditations on silence have generated countless fictional characters, plots and subplots.

From prose to fiction, these diasporic developments include the characters' wanderings in the American wilderness and in labyrinthine cities. Wandering is a fictional obsession which

is rooted in Auster's autobiographical experience. Recalling his trip to Amsterdam from a third person narrative perspective in *The Invention of Solitude*, he explains that "he wandered. He walked around in circles. He allowed himself to be lost. [...] He saw that his steps, by taking him *nowhere*, were taking him *nowhere* but into himself. He was wandering inside himself, and he was lost" (Auster 1988, 86-7, emphasis added). This passage unmistakably reads like *City of Glass* (1985), in which the characters' wanderings echo biblical myths. The key to the riddle of the B-A-B-E-L cartography in the New York streets involves a cryptic dream about YHWH.

Auster's first novel not only resonates with his own wanderings, but also with Edmond Jabès and Charles Reznikoff's. According to Auster, Charles Reznikoff—as "a hyphenated American, a Jewish-American" poet—occupies an "unstable middle ground" which is "the condition of being in two places at the same time, or, quite simply, the condition of being *nowhere*" (Auster 2003, 379, emphasis added). As Auster points out, Reznikoff "has been exiled twice—as a Jew, and from Judaism as well" (Auster 2003, 378). In this essay, Auster calls Reznikoff a "poet of the eye" (Auster 2003, 373). Wandering in New York City like Reznikoff, Quinn, the writer and main character of *City of Glass*, is "reducing himself to a seeing eye" (Auster 1987, 4). By disappearing almost completely during his peregrination in "the *nowhere* he had built around himself" (Auster 1987, 4, emphasis added), Quinn reproduces the Objectivist poet's desubjectivation. Perhaps even more than Quinn, Anna Blume stands out as the archetypal wanderer in Auster's fiction. In the terrifying post-Holocaust landscape of *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), the lonely Anna experiences exile and she becomes the embodiment of the Jew as solitary wanderer. The following conversation with a rabbi takes place in a library:

"I thought all the Jews were dead," I whispered.

"There are a few of us left," he said, smiling at me again. "It's not so easy to get rid of us, you know."

"I'm Jewish, too," I blurted out. "My name is Anna Blume, and I came here from far away."
(Auster 1987, 95)

Like Rothenberg, Auster keeps re-living and re-presenting the traumas of the Jewish community, delocalizing them in space and time. In "The Art of Worry", his catalogue preface for an Art Spiegelman exhibition (2003), Auster claims that on September 11, 2001, "in the fire and smoke of three thousand incinerated bodies, a holocaust was visited upon us"

(Auster 2003, 462). The 9/11 attacks are a re-presentation of the Holocaust, but “on a smaller scale”, in Rothenberg’s words. In both Auster and Rothenberg’s post-9/11 works, “the fire”—which is found in *The Burning Babe* (Rothenberg 2007) and *The Brooklyn Follies* (Auster 2005, 304)—is “the instrument of destruction, of annihilation, in no sense the fire of redemption”. Auster’s urgent need to testify in the wake of the recent tragedy brought back these traces of the Diaspora inside the fiction, thanks to his experiments in paradigmatic referentiality and his post-modern games with naming, silence and speech, presence and absence (especially in *The Brooklyn Follies*). In *Man in the Dark* (2008), the unspeakable vision of a boy tortured and beheaded by terrorists in Iran, who is referred to as “a person and not a person: une *nature morte*” (Auster 2008, 176), revives stories of the death camps when the narrator August Brill, in a post-traumatic state of shock, cannot sleep at night.

Auster’s view of story-telling and witnessing, and his testing of narrative possibilities illustrate Gilles Deleuze’s conception of literature as the creation of a people to come (Deleuze 1993, 15). In the same vein, Rothenberg’s *A Book of the Book* (2000) features Maurice Blanchot’s *The Book to Come* (1959), another important source of inspiration for both Rothenberg and Auster. Rothenberg’s re-consideration of the role and the power of the poet (who can “express the inexpressible”¹⁰) echoes Auster’s “*Bios Unlimited*”, a fantasy about the biographies of the anonymous dead that would “resurrect people in words” and “outlive us all” (Auster 2005, 303). Against all odds, the unnamable subtexts of Auster and Rothenberg’s “writing of the disaster” (Blanchot 1980) enable them to say more.

If “all Poets are Jews,” it also means that “of course—conversely—all Jews aren’t poets” (Rothenberg 2008, 55). Rothenberg’s current project is an anthology of *outsider* poetry that would include “basically any and all forms of poetry *outside of literature*”. Be it in their testimonies and anthologies, in their poems, translations and novels, in their fake or genuine spiritual enlightenment,¹¹ Auster and Rothenberg keep borrowing from the ancestral “babble” and the messianic visions of the “Jewish mystics, thieves and madmen”. Their unorthodox works are representative of a radical trend of contemporary (Jewish-American) Diaspora writing which puts forward a universal sense of exile and acknowledges the strengths and limitations of language: “if language is to be pushed to the limit, then the writer must condemn himself to an exile of doubt, to a desert of uncertainty” (Auster 2003, 372).

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Notes

¹ Marina Tsvetaeva, quoted by Paul Auster in “Book of the Dead” (Auster 2003, 372), and by Jerome Rothenberg in “Prologomena to a Poetics” (Rothenberg 1996, 69).

² Edmond Jabès, quoted by Paul Auster in “Book of the Dead” (Auster 2003, 367) and by Jerome Rothenberg in *Poems for the Millennium* (Rothenberg 1998, 107).

³ “God does no play much a part of it all”, he continues, but “the Torah kept the Diaspora together. [...] This material is in our blood stream now, and we are never going to get rid of it. And here we are, living in the ambiguous condition of being Jews who are not Jews, proud of being Jews but never wanting to practice Judaism.” This forum, featuring Rothenberg and Auster, was chaired by Charles Bernstein at the American Jewish Historical Society (Manhattan, Sep 21, 2004). A collection of these contributions was recently published (Paul Miller 2010). After using Kafka’s famous phrase in his preface to *A Big Jewish Book*, “what have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself” (Rothenberg 1981, 118), Rothenberg came back to it during the forum, explaining that it is “an extraordinarily Jewish statement” (in “Secular Jewish Culture / Radical Poetic Practice”, Rothenberg 2008, 56).

⁴ Interview with Jerome Rothenberg (Le Mans: Université du Maine, October 2010).

⁵ Auster and Rothenberg are the heirs of Diaspora writers Edmond Jabès, Paul Celan, Franz Kafka, George Oppen and Charles Reznikoff. While Auster suffuses the smooth surface of his latest novels with the seeds of his early investigations on “that-which-cannot-be-spoken” (Auster 2004, 157), Rothenberg has done an impressive amount of scholarly research that lead him back to the roots of Judaism and poetry (his extensive corpus includes Genesis and the works of Gershom Scholem and Abraham Abulafia).

⁶ Reviewing Pierre Joris’s recent *Selections* of Paul Celan’s poems, Auster claimed that “Paul Celan is one of the essential poets—not just of the twentieth century, but of all time.” Paul Celan, *Selections*, Poets for the Millennium, ed. Pierre Joris, University of California Press, 2005.

⁷ See “Edmond Jabès’s Return to the Book” and “Reading Celan: 1959-1995”, in Rothenberg’s *Poetics & Polemics*, 2008.

⁸ “Rothenberg’s first published work, a group of translations from the German, appeared in the Winter 1957 issue of *The Hudson Review*. In 1958 Lawrence Ferlinghetti asked Rothenberg to translate a collection of postwar German poetry, which City Lights Books published in 1959 as *New Young German Poets*. This work marked the first appearance in English of such poets as Paul Celan, Gunter Grass, and Ingeborg Bachman” (*Register of the Jerome Rothenberg Papers*. Jerome Rothenberg Papers. MSS 0010, Mandeville Special Collections Library: UCSD, 2-3).

⁹ As Auster concludes in his memoir *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), “these pictures are the unspeakable” (Auster 1988, 98). Expressing his dissatisfaction with Reznikoff’s objective account in *Holocaust*, Auster also claims that “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).

¹⁰ In his preface to *A Big Jewish Book*, Rothenberg defines *poesis* as follows: “By *poesis* I mean a language process, a “sacred action” (A. Breton) by which a human being creates & recreates the circumstances & experiences of a real world, even where such circumstances may be rationalized otherwise as “contrary to fact.” [...] This “power of the word,” while often denied or reduced to posturing or lies in the “higher” civilizations, has continued as a tradition among poets & others who feel a need to “express the inexpressible”—a belief in what William Blake called “double vision” or, in Lévi-Strauss’s paraphrasing of Rimbaud, that “‘metaphor’ can change the world” (Rothenberg 1981, 120).

¹¹ During our conversation on spirituality in his work, Paul Auster told me that “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”.