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A Walk in the White Spaces

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James M. Hutchisson, editor. *Conversations with Paul Auster*. UP of Mississippi, 2013, 220 pages.
Paul Auster. *A Life in Words: Conversations with I.B. Siegumfeldt*. Seven Stories P, 2017, 320 pages.

The two volumes under discussion—*Conversations with Paul Auster* edited by James M. Hutchisson (2013) and Paul Auster's *A Life in Words: Conversations with I.B. Siegumfeldt* (2017)—take us behind the scenes of his writing process as Paul Auster lets us into the intricate entanglements of his oeuvre, which includes translations, essays, poetry, prose (fiction and non-fiction), and movies. Both the publications, which are over 200 and 300 pages, respectively, offer the reader not merely a sneak peek backstage, but rather a long and riveting walk through the territory that constitutes Auster's literary universe.

The 2013 volume is a collection of interviews that Auster gave in the years 1985-2010. It is a well prepared selection of seventeen conversations, each of them conducted by a different person, most of them of literary/artistic background as well: other writers, authors, a poet, a painter, a film operator, activists, radio personalities, scholars, and journalists; one interview includes questions from the public. James M. Hutchisson arranged the interviews in the order of their publication starting with a short 2-page 1985 conversation led by Stephen Rodefer which oscillates around Auster's initial literary activities as a translator, and he closes the volume with the talk conducted by Nick Obourn which is concerned with Auster's novel *Invisible* (2009). This chronological arrangement enables us to follow Auster's works in the order of passed time and follow the distinctive relationship between his works where one text grows out of another.

As Auster himself claims: "All my work is of a piece" (Mallia 6); in another interview he maintains this affirmation explaining that his texts are "The story of my obsessions .... The saga of the things that haunt me ... all my books seem to revolve around the same set of questions, the same human dilemmas" (McCaffery and Gregory 18).While he takes himself or perhaps rather his inner terrain as the ground for narrative exploration, his books respond to one another. For instance, *The Book of Memory* emerged out of *Portrait of an Invisible Man* and the two are published together as the volume *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), his first longer prose work. The family saga/bildungsroman *Moon Palace* (1989) and *The Music of Chance* (1990), a dark novel about the meaning of freedom, also form a pair: "At the end of *Moon Palace*, Fogg is driving out west in a car… I realized that I wanted to get back inside that car" (McCaffery and Gregory 38). As Auster himself explains: "In some sense, *Moon Palace* and *The Music of Chance* are opposite books, mirrors reflections of each other" (Irwin 41). It proves to be a rule rather than an exception that Auster operates

by pairs[1]: the other novels where the same or similar impulses and/or events give rise to different responses include *The Book of Illusions* (2002) and *Oracle Night* (2003), *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006) and *Man in the Dark* (2008)—also re-published in one volume in as *Day/Night: Two Novels* in 2013, as well as *Invisible* (2009) and *Sunset Park* (2010). Not surprisingly, the same is true of two of his movies: *Smoke* (1995) and *Blue in the Face* (1995): "They're opposite sides of the same coin… and the two films seem to complement each other in mysterious ways" (Insdorf 63). Auster's universe is one of doubles and of connection: either by purposeful design or by chance, where it is sometimes hard to determine which is which. This uncertainty propels and structures the narrative mechanics of his texts.

Hutchisson's arrangement of the interviews has an accumulative effect where some serious and trivial details are revealed and gradually expand the context in which Auster's works emerged. The onus is on the reader to keep in mind all these different elements both known and new available for swift recall and in constant interaction as potential constituents of Auster's literary expressions. While obviously the interviews were not conducted with the view of being put together in one volume, the effect they jointly achieve is of a meaningful collage—it is as if they were meant to be published this way where one interview informs another and augments its significance—just like Auster's texts do. As such, the interviewer's voices come across as a unanimous inquisitive literary detective persona investigating the case of the text.

The entanglements between Auster's texts in general and novels in particular go beyond his predilection for pairs; they are intensely intricate and complex and result from the work of a peculiar sensibility for connections, metaphors, and symbols that is able to arrest associations and remains in a vigilant attunement to the everyday life. From the interviews it transpires that the links between Auster's texts are multiple and of varied kinds and they form idiosyncratic constellations. The translations were an indispensable apprenticeship in language and literary form, whereas poetry was the bedrock for his prose, which he actually gradually entered on different levels and in different ways with: first the threshold narrative poem "White Spaces" (1980), secondly with the non-fiction *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), and finally with the novel *The New York Trilogy* (1987). The movies seem, on the other hand, to grow out of his prose and poetry alike and then feed back to his prose (Auster claims to no longer write poetry, at least not for publication). His novels and autobiographical texts are all linked (across and within genres) by formal devices and thematic threads or even whole webs of connections in terms of characters' names and features, events, places, issues explored, things, objects, artefacts. The continuity of the literary effort is also sometimes paradoxically secured by an outward breaking with or going against what he had previously written. Yet the wrestling ground remains the same, the territory does not change, it gets expanded. In fact Auster's literary movements are quite circular, or perhaps rather cyclical. Hence, whereas the texts themselves are read word by word in linear progression, the works together form and exist in a dialogical simultaneity.[2] Overall, with each text the reader realizes that they enter a space that is at once new

1 There are also triptychs: *The New York Trilogy and Moon Palace*—inside one novel we have three interlocking stories and 3 versions of the (same) story simultaneously.

2 Which is outwardly thematized in *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2007).

and familiar, a mesh of a greater or smaller density of signification whereas its center is exactly where the reader currently finds him/herself. While each text can be read on its own and for its own sake, it can also be pried deeper as a part of a much greater endeavor, a life-time achievement.

Moreover, the interviews lay bare that whereas the dates of publications are known, they are not necessarily close in time to the very genesis of a given book, especially when it comes to Auster's earliest literary output. From the interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory we learn that this was the case of *In the Country of Last Things* (1987). According to Auster, Anna Blume, the main protagonist, first came to him in the early 1970s as a voice which he could not at first sufficiently uphold to continue with the story. The voice returned when Auster was midway through the composition of his universally famous *The New York Trilogy*, so he turned his efforts into writing the first 30/40 pages of Blume's story in between the 2nd (*Ghosts*) and 3rd (*The Locked Room*) parts of the former. The story had an initial working title *Anna Blume Walks Through the 20th Century*, which definitely transmits the aura of the work and one wonders why it disappeared from the final version, why it did not stay at least as a subtitle. In this interview, Auster also reveals his wife, the author Siri Hustvedt, to be his first reader and the one who steadfastly encouraged him as he wrote this novel where the leading voice is that of a woman.

All of the interviews inevitably delve into—either right from the start or they ultimately veer towards—the writing process itself and Auster is willing to explore it for us. The book within a book structure, the meta-narrative and meta-fictional layers in his novels, the intense self-reflexivity on part of himself as the author and his characters as authors—all these that are considered elements of postmodern fiction Auster grounds and familiarizes as parts of daily reality. He considers himself primarily a storyteller, a realist, who is gripped by images (walls, falling from high places, stone, etc.) or fragments of images (e.g. David Zimmer's mustache). These are the grains in which he sees the world of a particular novel with its peculiar axis emerge: the image(s) as character, the character as image(s). And, as has already be mentioned, the voice. Each character, alongside their unique autonomy, comes with their distinct tone. The figure's speech—its rhythm, cadence, melody—orchestrates the narrative form: "If it really has to be said, it will create its own form" (Mallia 5).

Auster experiments with form are not for the sake of experimentation but are undertaken to do justice to the inner logic of his endeavors. He claims to answer to the story as it comes to him appropriated by its characters. In his fiction and non-fiction he is frequently guided by a title, if provisional, and explores the possibilities and boundaries of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person narration; he also combines the different modes within one text. He has experimented with recurrent themes, footnotes, abandoned plots, parallel plots, shorter book formats and extensively long books; he divided his books in parts, sections, added epilogues, he portioned the material from one books into more than two, he extricated characters from one text to another. He has had his books filmed (*The Music of Chance*), directed his own movies (*Lulu on the Bridge*), and described movies in his books (*The Inner Life of Martin Frost* in *The Book of Illusions*). The interviewers elicit information on Auster's literary influences and he promptly supplies the classic fairy tale, the international and national fables, the pioneering works of Kafka, Beckett,

Musil, Jabes, the American classics of Hawthorne, Poe, Thoreau, and many others. There are some literary theorists mentioned as well (at Columbia University he was supervised by Edward Said): Blanchot, Bakhtin, Sartre, and many others, but the reader wishes for more and Auster does not like to admit here his in fact broad literary knowledge or perhaps does not want us to be sidetracked or gripped by theory too much. One thing is certain: in his acts of invention he definitely is about diversity and inclusiveness, he is more about letting things in than keeping things out (Irwin 45).

Auster stands by both the physicality of writing and his intuition as he is led on by the will of his figures, who bear (and wear) the traces of himself. His characters are the manifestation of what he dubs "the multiplicity of the singular" (McCaffery and Gregory 35): some of his features and autobiographical facts he endows them with on purpose, some of his personal memories resurface embodied in their stories as if of their own accord. Reading the interviews, the conclusion transpires that staying true to his figures is tantamount to staying true to the parts he harbors in himself, it is a way of maintaining integrity. Moreover, what emerges from the interviews is Auster's engagement with the figures in terms of facing them with particular questions and sending them on urgent missions—philosophical, existential, literary, cultural, as well as prosaic everyday errands—while he closely follows in their tracks with language. Thus, the surface, the known, and the visible are plumbed for the dark, the hidden, the inaccessible, the scars, the traumas, the secrets—all of which are expressed as exerting their influence in mysterious ways. When he writes, Auster tends to deal with the matters at hand: his engagements, obsessions, his reactions, and emotions to both past and current events are relived and reconsidered in different configurations. He maintains he has this compulsion to write, for him it is an inner necessity, or as Hutchisson reminds us of Auster's own words: "a matter of survival" (Hutchisson xv). His characters go through crises, we witness them falling into pits, metaphorical and literal, or we find them already there at the bottom while they are trying to hoist themselves and stand on their own two feet again (serendipity is often of help here). Sometimes their predicaments are a matter of the conundrum of forces beyond them, sometimes they are of the character's own making. Nevertheless, the writing is not about finding the culprit or the reasons why (or at least not solely and not directly), it is not so much about the whodunnit, but a matter of working through whatever appears in front of one and remaining human in the process.

In the interview by Michel Contat, the longest conversation in the collection, placed right in the center of the book, we get closest to Paul Auster's invention, especially in the talk about Auster's manuscripts, which are housed at The Berg Collection in the New York Public Library. These can be perused by anyone interested and, as Contat remarks, contain useful information about Auster's drafts, his planning, outlining, self-censorship, editing. Interesting here is that even though Auster claims to be moving in the dark and his works to be resolved only in the process of writing, here he admits to opting for an arch, a frame to the book: "everything you say in the beginning of the book is somehow reflected in the end. So if you don't have a sense of the whole shape of it, it makes the beginning lose its meaning also." (Contat 76).

James M. Hutchisson's collection of interviews with Paul Auster is an awaited first publication of this kind dedicated to the writer. Virtually all of the included

interviews have acquired the status of iconic conversations and key reference points for Auster's audience. It is with gratefulness that the readers welcome them collected together between the covers of a single volume. The editor provides us with an informative introduction to the entire collection, includes also the helpful list of Auster's works to date, a chronology in terms of a timeline of achievements and biographical information on the writer, and an index. Every interview comes also with the information on where it was first published, which is important especially for scholars and researchers. What could be added in this volume would be the notes on the particular interviewers, a short biographical information on each person who conducted the interview would be appreciated. All in all, the volume *Conversations with Paul Auster* is a valuable contribution to the field of studies on the American author.

Hutchisson begins his introduction with an apt statement that "Paul Auster has granted a lot of interviews, more so perhaps than most contemporary writers" (xi). The size of the interview material collected throughout the years somewhat confirms the suspicion that for Auster interviews are more than just a fulfillment of his obligation to the publishers, as he claims them to be. In the interviews he gives there is a noticeable pleasure on his part, a veritable engagement in the conversations about his work and himself as a writer. One could even risk a conclusion that the talks are where his work is not so much discussed as continued but in a different form, i.e. in a dialogue with the immediate other person instead of a distant reader. Whereas Hutschisson's collection was a retroactive effort, the book long interview *A Life in Words: Conversations with I.B. Siegumfeldt* (2007) began as a collaborative endeavor of the scholar and the writer with the view to being published as such.

The book opens with a "Preface" which promptly recalls that at the heart of Auster's writing is the unknown and writing is "about accommodating the unknown" (89). The author of the now 17 novels and 5 autobiographical books, he invariably claims to maintain a distance from the inner source that emits the intuitive impulses. Yet, Siegumfeldt's promise to focus on *What*, *When*, and *Where*—instead of the usual *Why* and *How*—persuaded him to partake in the extended interview, first of its kind, about his work with a scholar that "took place from November 2011 to November 2013" (ix). The volume takes the entire oeuvre (in the chronological order) of the writer into consideration and is divided into two parts: "Autobiographical Writings" and "Novels." These are preceded by a preface and a prologue, and are followed by the complete list of Auster's works, a bibliography, and an index.

To the reader familiar with the previous publication, this book reads as both an insightful repetition and a continuation—a confirmation and a broadening of the already covered ground as well as a discovery of some new regions. The focus is on all aspects of the writer's craft, which helps contextualize his works in the greatest detail yet. The idea is to devote certain time and pages to the singular works by Auster. The dialogue revolves around the most crucial themes: the personal aspects, family matters and secrets, father-son relations, author-character relations, the vicissitudes of making a living as a writer, the regular stages in the development of a person—from early boyhood to advanced manhood, and others. Here prominent are also the losses in time: missing people, places, objects (that both fiction and non-fiction can in a way preserve, retrieve). Siegumfeldt addresses also the shifts in Auster's oeuvre as it

expands: the figures of the women become more developed and complex; the structural and formal aspects of the later memoirs and novels are also of import. Focus is also on the immanent fingerprint features of his prose: the vicissitudes of solitude together with the feelings and states of enclosure as well as incessant movement, i.e. on Auster's grammar of wandering and wondering, walking and pacing, dancing and jumping. The physicality of writing is mirrored by the physicality of moving, and movement is what secures the flow of language for him.

The later works are addressed as well where we witness a recourse to the tangible physicality in Auster's oeuvre with *Winter Journal* (2012): a book about the body (where writing starts), the spaces it traverses, the senses and sensory data; it is also about Auster's mother so it complements *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) over a span of thirty years. It also ties in with "White Spaces" (1980), the breakthrough symbolic prose poem, and thus one can risk a statement that Auster's autobiographical works have come full circle. This poetic memoir, yet again, has its immediate sequel, a mirror complementary text in *Report from the Interior* (2013). This text in turn is devoted to life perceived on the inside, to the intellectual epiphanies: "inner development, thought, morality, aesthetics, politics, religion" (Auster 65); it is about being a member of society, culture, nation. Both memoirs are written in the second person singular, which continues Auster's penchant for formal expeditions. These are continued in the novels. In *Invisible*, he used more than one narrator for the first time (there are three narrative voices). In that novel also one of its parts is written in the 2nd person (aside the 1st and 3rd person narration) and thus he explores its potential this time in fiction. *Sunset Park*, on the other hand is his only novel set in the present (all others are set in the past). His narrative technique here is new inasmuch as in composing the sentences he follows the associative wanderings of the mind (albeit not in the stream-of-consciousness way as we are familiar with).

Siegumfeldt asks Auster important questions about the author's placement between the world and the word, his standing with regard to time and place, the relationship with language, the experiences of inadequacy and failure as well as the triumphs of expression and composition. One of the leading concerns that runs through the entire book interview, and it also informs the entire oeuvre of Auster, is the question of ambiguity. The talk lays bare the multidimensionality of ambiguity in his text: the ambiguity that results from the perception of chance (coincidence vs. purpose; or: irregularity vs. pattern), the ambiguity that stems from the impossibility to know another person when one hardly is able to know oneself (Auster talks here of the self as a spectrum rather than an entity and the sometimes contradictory conclusions one arrives at about oneself and other people). Ambiguity is also encapsulated in one of Auster's early formulations: "The world is in my head. My body is in the world" (73, 227). Further, ambiguity ties in with the notions of contradiction and paradox, "two truths that are equal and opposite" (46) together with the conclusion that: "we can never arrive at any stable truth. There *is* no one answer. Once you think you have one, that's the moment when you begin to drown" (96). Also, ambiguity happens to be the effect we witness in *The New York Trilogy*—an apprenticeship in living with ambiguity in the form of a novel—of "the kind of writing that cancels itself out, almost with every sentence, every thought, so that, ultimately, it's confusing" (110). Auster's

ambiguity looks forward onto the horizon of the future but what it promises to him is an abundance of more questions. As he repeats this time in reference to *Sunset Park*: "Things are not going to be resolved, and he has to learn to live with it" (302).

Overall, this volume sets some records straight, especially Auster's insistence upon the difference between his texts of fact and his texts of fiction. It also draws on and continues the early stories Auster either imparted in his works or during interviews. Some of the stories come full circle, like the one when as a young boy he wanted an autograph from Willie May but didn't have a pencil; he left empty-handed. Now, after 52 years, by a confluence of circumstances and an engagement of some people, he is in a possession of a baseball ball signed to him by the baseballer himself. Life and fiction for Auster follow similar, if not the same, trajectories. In fact, he does not let go of the fascination of human perception of reality and invention, fact and fiction—the way we consider narratives and how we decide whether something is a real occurrence or has been created for the sake of the story, and how wrong we can sometimes be in our judgments (e.g. the episode of the dog playing the piano in *Timbuktu,* as well as the reasons for the inclusion). Overall, Auster staunchly believes, in the end it is not about the distinction as such, but about the power of the story and our readiness to suspend our disbelief and jump for/into it; to have the courage to make a leap of faith over the mounting suspicion and believe the tale, whereas how we manage in the process so much depends on how we read.

Auster opens up in the dialogue with Siegumfeldt and sheds some new light on the context in which his books have been composed. Again, we learn of some other works that have originated much earlier than it was believed: *Moon Palace* goes back to 1968, and in fact it was once one book with *City of Glass* (1985), whereas the origins of *Oracle Night* date back to 1982. Of great interest is Auster's own approach to *Timbuktu*, as well as the reasons for the inclusion of the endearing story of Kafka's doll in the only book of his written as a comedy—*The Brooklyn Follies*. Insightful are Siegumfeldt's readings of and to-the-point remarks about the later novels: *Travels in the Scriptorium*, *Invisible,* and *Sunset Park* that contextualize Auster's prose in a different perspective. He in turn, shares his reading background, which includes texts by: Merleau-Ponty, Kierkegaard, Hume, Berkeley, Kant, Descartes, Pascal, Marx, Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein, all pre-Socratics, John Milton, Cervantes, Dostoyevsky, and many others. For the first time, in this volume Auster talks about religion and Judaism quite extensively. He also reveals his penchant for numbers. Overall, Auster and Siegumfeldt together take their reader for a long talk/a long walk through the main and the less traveled roads and that is an immensely rewarding experience. The scholar's idea and its fulfillment is a great accomplishment, a feast for Auster's readers, and a valuable contribution to the studies on the contemporary writer, and to the research on the writing process and authorship in general.

In both the volumes of interviews here considered what we participate in is an evolution of man as writer and writer as man, the author of translations, poetry, essays, memoirs, novels, and movie scripts who never flinches from using himself to get to the core of what it means to be human, and a self-reflexive human at that. In the end, both the volumes leave us with a sense of direction and a challenge to (re) discover Auster's universe: both the nicely zoomed in on places as well as the remaining

territory nearby and further away. In both *Conversations with Paul Auster* and in *A Life in Words: Conversations with I.B. Siegumfeldt* some extensive plumbing is exposed as the mechanics of Auster's literary engagement emerges from the exchange of readings and viewpoints. As such, the interviews are a continuation of his writerly endeavor in the form of dialogue—a meeting of words, perspectives, and meanings, if provisional. In fact, these two volumes not only prolong and extend Auster's oeuvre but have become an already indispensable part of it themselves, a part of the greater narrative rhizome that constitutes his integral literary universe—a mesh of entangled lines and connections—that as such opens up towards other texts and the world at large.[3]

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3 The two volumes of interviews do not cover the latest works by Auster: the novel *4321* (that is composed of 4 parallel narratives) and the biographical *Burning Boy: The Life and Work of Stephen Crane*, which were published in 2017 and 2021, respectively.