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AILING AUTHORS: PAUL AUSTER'S *TRAVELS IN THE SCRIPTORIUM* AND PHILIP ROTH'S *EXIT GHOST*

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Seven years after the attacks of 9/11 it is still unclear how, and to what extent, American literature has been or will be altered by the events and their aftermath. The scholar of contemporary literature may speak of 'the 9/11 novel' to refer to books dealing directly with the events of the day, but there is also a wider category of 'the post-9/11 novel' which not only denotes the self-explanatory date of publication, but more crucially carries the implication that all contemporary American literature can and should be read in the light of what happened and its consequences. The two novels under discussion here show that the distinction between the 9/11 and the post-9/11 novel is not always clear. Whereas Roth's novel is set in New York after 9/11, refers specifically to the event and its effect on New Yorkers, and contains important references to politics and world affairs, Auster's book is set in a primarily *textual* chronotope: an unidentifiable, non-realist time and place devoid of external referents. Yet Roth's novel is not in any obvious way 'about' 9/11 and New York, whereas Auster's novel, upon closer scrutiny, turns out to be a lot less 'timeless' than a first reading might suggest. What the two books have in common is a preoccupation with the role of the American author in contemporary society, and the place of the novel in today's culture. There are of course a myriad good reasons why an American author may be asking these questions now, and indeed these are questions that have preoccupied authors throughout literary history. What these books help us to understand is how the question of authorship has now arisen as a response to the new realities precipitated by the attacks, and how these two authors have addressed the question in ways that seem strikingly dissimilar and yet have a lot in common. Roth and Auster have made different aesthetic, structural and narrative choices, and yet studying their books in tandem can prove fruitful and illuminating.

When Paul Auster's *Travels in the Scriptorium* came out in 2006, it seemed that even though there was poignancy and depth in the central premise of the author tormented by his fictional characters, it was a curiously self-indulgent book to publish in 2006, and a strange follow-up to *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005), which had seen the author venture further out of his room than even before. Whereas *The Brooklyn Follies* had been a strangely upbeat 9/11 novel about the real, lived world, this one, as the blurb sug-

gested, represented a 'return to more metaphysical territory'. In other words, Auster appeared to be playing the same kind of metafictional game he had been playing since the beginning of his novelistic career in the 1980s, and it seemed for that reason that *Travels* was not only somewhat slight but also an unnecessary novel. Most reviewers seemed to share this assessment. The book was described as a puzzle, a maze, or a magician's trick (Smith, Marx, Barra). In *The New York Times Book Review*, Sophie Harrison complained that the reader couldn't care about the characters, and likened the book to a masterclass in postmodernist fiction. Deborah Friedell, reviewing for the *Times Literary Supplement*, also gave the book a cool reception, but she came closer than others to acknowledging its complexity by arguing that the central question was 'not to do with today's political situation, but about the morality of fiction-writing'.

A year and a half later Philip Roth published *Exit Ghost* (2007), and that book altered my critical perception of Auster's novel. In fact, reading these two novels alongside one another can help to illuminate the relations between the two novelists' thematic concerns, as well as their textual strategies. Auster and Roth had both written pre-9/11 novels that linked the figure of the author with that of terrorist (*Leviathan* and *American Pastoral*), and now with these books both were returning to the idea of the author's role and responsibility, examined through multi-layered, elaborately constructed texts. *Exit Ghost* can help us to find a new and more meaningful context for *Travels in the Scriptorium*, and it is this relationship between the two books that this article will explore while attempting to draw some conclusions about the role of the American author in post-9/11 culture. These two novels ask important questions about what it means to be an American writer at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and what it means to be a New York writer after 9/11 (of course, Roth is not a New York writer in the same way that Auster is, but the New York setting is crucial). Both writers address the meaning and importance of authorship by exploring the lived world by means of the invented world, and both use the central trope of the ailing author to aid their investigations into contemporary authorship.

Paul Auster's novel tells the story of Mr Blank: a frail man with a failing memory who sits alone in a room, looking at piles of photographs, reading a manuscript, and occasionally receiving visitors who may or may not be trying to harm him. The reader already familiar with Auster's *œuvre* soon realizes that the people in the photographs and the visitors are all characters from previous novels who are now coming to call the author into account. It is important that the author, Mr Blank, cannot remember creating them and finds it hard to accept responsibility for their fate. His stance recalls the observation made by Peter Aaron in *Leviathan*: 'A book is a mysterious object, I said, and once it floats out into the world, anything can happen. ... For better or worse, it's completely out of your control' (Auster, 1992: 4). Mr Blank's loss of control and authority is reflected in his physical weakness. When we first meet him, he is wearing pyjamas and slippers, and he feels tired and infirm. He speaks to himself in a weary voice, he groans in pain, and he is losing his memory. In one of the early scenes in the book, he is shown using the bathroom, and being unable either to bend or to crouch to pull up his pyjama bottoms from around his ankles, while later in the day he takes a fall and wets himself. These scenes have a two-fold effect: they highlight the author's helplessness, while they also call attention to his physical existence, or what Umberto Eco



has called the 'empirical author' (Eco, 1992: 69). By calling attention to the author's frail nature, Auster is perhaps reflecting on his own role, as his books become more political than the early metafictional ones in a culture that seems to have a diminishing capacity for literary introspection. Meanwhile, the question raised by the emphasis on the author's body is whether the 'real', living, breathing author should be inferred from the textual representation of a writer by the same name. Auster and Roth have explored in much of their writing the wider question of the blurring of the real and the imagined, and they have often done this through the creation of author characters provocatively and deceptively called Paul Auster, Peter Aaron, John Trause, Philip Roth, and of course Nathan Zuckerman.

Roth's novel continues to chronicle Zuckerman's physical decline. As we have known for some time, he is impotent and incontinent, and it is his desire to alleviate some of his physical suffering that brings him to New York and sets the events of the plot in motion. Zuckerman is 71; like Mr Blank, he is by no means an old person by today's standards, but he is depicted as an older person, both through his physical infirmity and through his withdrawal from the world of current affairs and technological progress. About halfway through the novel Zuckerman admits in a parenthetical aside that his memory is failing him, and that he has to work fast before he loses the ability to recall words:

nothing is certain any longer expect that this will likely be my last attempt to persist in groping for words to combine into the sentences and paragraphs of a book. Because permanent groping is what it is now, a groping that goes well beyond the anxious groping for fluency that writing is to begin with (159).

He goes on to link his physical incontinence with this loss of recall, stating that 'the leakage I'd been experiencing wasn't just from my penis, nor was the failure restricted to the bladder's sphincter ... This time it was my mind' (162). Against this gradual degeneration of body and mind, he feels helpless; he speaks of 'the imp of amnesia, the demon of forgetfulness', and in one of the novel's most poignant passages he confesses his powerlessness, feeling

as though something diabolical residing in my brain ... against whose powers of destruction I could bring no effective counterforce were prompting me to suffer these lapses solely for the fun of watching me degenerate, the ultimate gleeful goal to turn someone whose acuity as a writer was sustained by memory and verbal passion into a pointless man (159).

It is this fear of becoming a pointless man that describes what Auster and Roth are saying about the author in their novels; the weak, impotent, leaking body is an apt image for the fate of the American writer at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Of course, in terms of American literary history the connection between the figure of the author and the body politic is not new, nor is the notion of the physically ailing author a new phenomenon. It is however telling that both Auster and Roth have written novels that revisit earlier fictional characters and reconsider older thematic concerns. It is this revisiting that has prompted me to consider whether these two novels can be read in any meaningful way as post-9/11 investigations into authorship. The attacks on New York were also an event that put the novelist's imagination to shame;

a visual spectacle that has competed with the written word, and ultimately a traumatic event whose full impact may yet not be apparent. In wider terms, the media event that 9/11 and its aftermath have become, the military action that followed the attacks, Bush's rhetoric and actions, and generally America's role in world affairs have all created a new context in which American authorship needs to be considered.

It is significant that in order to explore authorship both books, in different ways, create levels or layers of reality and fiction, and both novels show the writer as isolated from the world. Mr Blank is imprisoned in a room where he is kept under constant surveillance. There are some hints that his condition is self-imposed, and that it is part of an experiment, which would make his incarceration an extreme version of the familiar Auster trope of the writer alone in his room. Yet Mr Blank cannot remember asking to be put away in this room, nor is he entirely certain whether he is a prisoner or whether his door is unlocked and he is free to leave when he wants to. The writer's room is thus transformed from a place of contemplation to an ambiguous prison. More to the point, this is also a textual prison in several ways. Near the end of the book, we find out that everything we have been reading takes place within another manuscript that Mr Blank starts to read; when he comes to the end, he will have to pick up a manuscript and start reading again, in a *mise-en-abyme* that recalls Auster's much earlier textual experimentations. The room is also a textual prison in the sense that there is as much emphasis on the words as there is on the objects it contains. We learn early on that nearly every object in the room has a label attached to it, giving its name: 'desk', 'lamp', 'wall' and so on. This could suggest that the author is suffering from leakage similar to Zuckerman's: he needs the labels because he can no longer recall the words for things. At the same time, though, the labels stuck on objects are also reminiscent of Peter Stillman's project in *City of Glass* to reunite words with things, signifiers with signifieds. In the post-9/11 context, where George W. Bush's rhetoric has proved so powerful, and so powerfully destructive, the earlier philosophical investigation into the meaning of words acquires a new significance here because it can be understood as more politicized. Elsewhere, Roth has spoken of the 'written' and 'unwritten' worlds,¹ and both authors have throughout their careers played with that distinction and challenged readers to consider how the world of the text relates to the 'outside' world. Auster and Roth are not overtly political writers, nor are they happy for their books to be discussed for their thematic concerns if that means paying little or no attention to their elaborate formal construction. Both novelists continue to foreground the primacy of the novel as discursive and aesthetic construct rather than a medium for social commentary or action. A lamp in the novel that comes with a label attached to it calling it a lamp reminds us that for Auster, as indeed for Roth, the message is not to be separated from the medium, and content does not exist irrespective of form.

Much of Roth's recent fiction has shown a new, or at least a much greater interest in history and the real, lived world. *The Plot Against America* (2004) was seen by many as a thinly disguised novel about Bush's presidency, while there can be little doubt that *American Pastoral* (1998) offered one of the most powerful depictions of postwar America. Yet he was keen to point out that *American Pastoral* was not 'a report card about

¹ The terms are Roth's own, but I am indebted to Simon Stow's exploration of them.



America', but rather 'a work of *fiction* about America' (McGrath, 2000; added emphasis), and with *Exit Ghost* similar care is taken to place sufficient distance between Zuckerman, the author character, and the real world of America in 2004. Zuckerman announces on the first page that he has lost the impulse to be in and of the present moment. He says he hasn't listened to the news or looked at a newspaper since 9/11; he doesn't use the internet, doesn't have a DVD or a VCR or a cell phone; he doesn't vote because he doesn't wish to register an opinion (36/7). 'Having lived enthralled by America for nearly three-quarters of a century, I had decided no longer to be overtaken every four years by the emotions of a child ... and the pain of an adult' (69). Zuckerman is also keen to stress that his return to New York does not symbolise any real desire to reconnect with the world he 'pulled the plug' on, to use his own words (69). Upon his arrival in the city, he makes for the subway to visit Ground Zero, but instead finds himself heading for the 'familiar rooms of the Metropolitan Museum' (15). This gesture indicates a desire to escape into the past, and into the realm of the aesthetic, rather than engage with contemporary world affairs. The reason Zuckerman gives for his change of mind is that he's 'withdrawn as witness and participant both' (15). There he is then, ageing, ailing, withdrawn, unwilling to register an opinion, unwilling to be witness or participant; not at all different, in other words, from Auster's bare bones of a fictional writer, his Mr Blank.

Mr Blank spends a large part of the novel reading a manuscript, while a manuscript is also at the heart of *Exit Ghost*. The manuscript that Mr Blank reads appears to be a work of fantasy or alternative history. The main character works for the Bureau of Internal Affairs of the vaguely defined but sinister-sounding Confederation, and he is sent on a dangerous mission into the Alien Territories. The allegorical overtones of this manuscript within the manuscript are reminiscent of Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), and it soon becomes clear that this narrative promises to be an allegory about the US fighting their various alien enemies. Yet the story remains incomplete, as the emphasis shifts away from what happens to the question of who wrote it. Mr Blank discovers that the unfinished MS was written by John Trause (anagram of Auster), who was a character in Auster's 2004 novel *Oracle Night*. Trause mentions the story to Sidney Orr, the narrator of *Oracle Night*, and describes it as a 'political parable' (168). 'The idea is that governments always need enemies, even when they're not at war. If you don't have an enemy, you make one up and spread the word' (168). To claim that a country's enemy is a discursive construct as Trause does here is to suggest also that Auster's brand of self-reflexive metafiction is not an aesthetic game, a puzzle or a curiosity, but rather a means of interrogating the immediate, lived world of politics and power. Further weight is added to this parable as it moves from *Oracle Night* to *Travels in the Scriptorium*: being vaguely aware of the fact that he is the creator of Trause, Mr Blank is able to imagine or tell the rest of the story. In it, the protagonist turns out to have been duped: his entire investigation has been arranged by government forces to lead to his written confession which can then help to start a war. He realises he has been made a 'false witness' and kills himself. The story of the MS within the MS in other words also deals with the writer's impotence, and the fear of being duped by someone else's plot. It explores the fear that the author may become a patsy, an unwilling and unsuspecting accomplice who is absorbed by the culture he is trying to interro-

gate or expose. Mr Blank's only form of power and control is to complete a story once attributed to one of his creations, but that's before the reader finds out that he is himself the figment of one of his creation, a character in someone else's manuscript. As Zuckerman put it in *The Counterlife*, 'we are all the inventions of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring up everyone else' (145).

A manuscript is also at the heart of *Exit Ghost*, where Zuckerman attempts to block the writing and publication of the biography of his literary hero, E.I. Lonoff. Richard Kliman proposes to expose a scandalous story of incest in Lonoff's early life, believing that this holds the key to his literary output. Zuckerman is horrified at the thought that a man's life can be used in this way to explain his fiction, finding such biographical explications both simplistic and insulting to the author's imaginative powers. Zuckerman thinks that biographical explanations of literature 'make matters worse' (47), and Amy Belette, who was once Lonoff's lover, calls the literary biography 'a second death' (154). Near the end of the novel, Zuckerman delivers his most powerful defence of his craft: 'Writers can be shattered by writing', he says. 'The primacy of the imaginative life can do that, and more' (267). The book ends with an instruction on how not to read: 'the man in control of the words, the man making up the stories all his life, winds up, after death, remembered, if at all, for a story made up about him' (275). This is Roth's warning against biographical readings of his fiction, and also against contextual readings that seek to separate the content from the form.

In 1961, Philip Roth famously complained that American actuality was outdoing the writer's talent (Roth, 2001: 167). In 1984, he told Hermione Lee that

writing novels is not the road to power. I don't believe that, in my society, novels effect serious changes in anyone other than the handful of people who are writers. ... If you ask if I *want* my fiction to change anything in the culture, the answer is still no' (Roth, 2001: 147, emphasis in the original).

The events of 9/11 and their consequences created a spectacle and a media event that took Roth's complaint that actuality is outdoing the writer's talent to an entirely different level. Roth and Auster, who in previous novels saw the author as linked to the terrorist in their capacity to become what Sacvan Bercovitch has called 'agents of change' (Bercovitch, 1978: 203) and in expressing rage against their country, are now considering the possibility that the author is more marginalized than ever before: a ghost, or a blank. Another novelist, Benjamin Kunkel, wrote on the fourth anniversary of 9/11 that there is 'a need to break things: to imaginatively break real things, to do intense symbolic violence to all manner of public and private clichés, to write as if your words had the revolutionary power they can never possess.' Zuckerman and Mr Blank may be too weak to break anything, but ultimately both novels end with the persistence rather than the demise of fiction. Mr Blank will have to continue reading every time he comes to the end of the narrative that imagines him as author; he will persist. Not only that, but Auster's latest novel, *Man in the Dark* (2008) can in many ways be read as a continuation of *Travels*. Here, the seventy-two-year-old protagonist is recovering from an accident and passes the time by creating a story in which 9/11 never happened, but the US was torn apart by civil war. The political parable and the metafictional puzzles provide thematic and structural links between the books, suggesting



that Auster may have found a way to reconcile his interest in metaphysical and ontological questions with his need to speak out about the post-9/11 political climate. *Exit Ghost* also ends with the persistence of the ailing author. This is best exemplified in the novel's two endings: the book ends with the words 'Gone for good', but this is in fact the fiction within the fiction that Zuckerman has created. Zuckerman's narrative ends twelve pages earlier with the defiant realization that 'I would die too, though not before I sat down at the desk by the window ... and, from that safe haven, ... wrote the final scene of *He and She*' (280). The subtlety of this ending draws attention to authorship: the novel that received so much attention because it dealt with Zuckerman's retirement actually ends with the author character refusing to die until he has finished writing. The author may be ailing, but it seems he is not yet dead.

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