

PAUL AUSTER, ESCRITOR UNIVERSAL

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INTRODUCTION

This special issue of *Esferas Literarias* is a tribute to the vast and diverse work of American writer Paul Auster, who left us on the 30th of April of 2024. The aim of this special issue is to illustrate, through the different contributions, the universality of his work and his heterogeneous contributions to literature and art. The Austerian world, through his poetry, non fiction, fiction and films, is represented in this issue to show its heterogeneity and versatility as a paradigm of American postmodernist literature.

Auster's literary career started with the publication of three groundbreaking poetry collections –*Unearth* (1974), *Wall Writing* (1976) and *Fragments from Cold* (1977) – which implicitly meant the beginning of his fiction and non-fiction work. Even though scholars and literary critics insistently asked for more poetry –some considered Auster a better poet than prose writer–, he left aside his life as a poet to become a novelist. Certainly, he alternated his poetry with his nonfictional work, more concretely, with the publication at the beginning of the 1980s of *The Invention of Solitude*, an autobiographical work in which Auster narrates his relationship with his father and the events around his sudden death. This text, that at first sight could be considered just a narration of Auster's life, becomes the theoretical foundation of his future fiction. That is, there is no way to separate this work from his postmodern masterpiece *The New York Trilogy* (1987), the novel that gave him a spot in the history of Postmodern American literature and included his name in the list of the Postmodern American literary boom together with names such as Philip Roth, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon or John Updike among many others. Proof of that are his handwritten notebooks, kept at the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, in which you can find the outlines for the trilogy and how *The Invention of Solitude* was meant to be one more volume for the trilogy at the very beginning. Apart from the father and son relationship, so important throughout Auster's literary and artistic career as a film maker, *The Invention of Solitude* plays with intertextuality and literary theory revealing the secrets between the future lines and characters of his oeuvre. Auster published 17 novels, the last one, *Baumgartner* in 2023, finished while he was already sick. This work allowed him to say goodbye to his readers in a great act of generosity typical of his kind and affable personality. However, as his wife Siri Hustvedt recently confessed in the tribute to Paul Auster organized by Circulo de Bellas Artes, Madrid in October 2023, Auster's literary life ended with a few letters he handwrote to his one-year-old grandson Miles Auster Hustvedt Ostrander and that she transcribes in her last book *Ghost Stories* (2026), a memoir about her life with her husband.

There are some biographical anecdotes in Auster's life that remarkably marked his life as an author. One of them is his junior year in Paris when he was a Columbia University student in 1967. His experience there motivated him to move there once he graduated in 1970. Part of this life experience was told in his autobiographical work *Hand to Mouth* published in 1995 and in which Auster narrates with affection the economic hardships he went through to survive in Paris. His stay in Paris put him into contact with the great French writers of the surrealism and symbolism that inspired his first poetry

collections. As he told Stephen Rodefer in one of his first published translations, he started translating when he was very young as an undergrad at Columbia University (*The Red Notebook* 101). He started translating Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine in order to understand what he was reading in French class:

The foreignness was daunting to me –as though a work written in a foreign language was somehow not real– and it was only by trying to put them into English that I began to penetrate them. At that point, it was a strictly private activity for me, a method to help me understand what I was reading, and I had no thoughts about trying to publish what I did. I suppose you could say that I started doing translations because I was such a slow learner. I couldn't imagine a linguistic reality other than English, and I was driven by a need to appropriate these works, to make them part of my own world. (Auster, 1995: 101)

Apart from that, Auster earned a living by translating texts and working with American publishing houses interested in introducing French literature to the American literary market. Eventually, what became a way of earning a living turned into a fundamental task in Auster's formation as a writer. In his work *The Invention of Solitude*, he expresses the importance translation had in his life:

A. sits down in his own room to translate another man's book, and it is as though he were entering that man's solitude and making it his own. But surely that is impossible. For once solitude has been breached, once a solitude has been taken on by another, it is no longer solitude, but a kind of companionship. Even though there is only one man in the room, there are two. (Auster, 1989: 136)

Furthermore, the European literary influence gave Auster's work a different tone from the work of other American Postmodernists and helped him connect with the European readers who contributed to transform his novels in best sellers in the last 25 years.

As a Postmodernist American writer, Auster created fictions focused on the urban space, concretely the city of New York, which became, most of the time, an extension of the central characters. Sometimes New York became a fictional character itself. In the context of New York, Brooklyn, his own neighborhood since he was born until he died, becomes the place where his characters interact and where the main action of most of his fiction develops. At the very beginning, with the publication of *City of Glass* in 1985, he also contributed to American literary postmodernism through the deconstruction and rewriting of other literary genres. In his case, critics acclaimed him as the master of anti-detective fiction. Certainly, the three volumes of the New York trilogy –*City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* (1985) and *The Locked Room* (1986)– experiment with anti-detective fiction, but as a metaphor to fictionalize one of his most important literary concerns: the literary space. As he recurrently explained in different interviews, he was not happy with those reviews: «Of course I used certain elements of detective fiction. Quinn, after all, writes detective novels and takes on the identity of someone he thinks is a detective. But I felt I was using those elements for such different ends, for things that had so little to do with detective stories, and I was somewhat disappointed by the emphasis that was put on them» (Auster, 1995: 108).

If we have to consider Auster a postmodernist writer it is above all for his examination of the process of writing and the fictionalization of all the parts involved: the character-author, the creative process, the inspiration and the game with the reader. Also, his postmodernity, in relation to the experimentation with writing, is linked to the constant intertextuality implied between the lines of his texts and the construction of his

characters. Auster's fiction is, above all, a tribute to all those writers who inspired his works and proof of that is the presence, explicit and implicit, of texts, names or even characters, in his fiction, that open a constant dialogue with other works. Again, as his foundational *ars poetica*, Auster reflects about the influence of other texts: «Sentences spill out of him at the speed of thought, and each word comes from a different language, a thousand tongues that clamor inside him at once, the din of it echoing through a maze of rooms, corridors, and stairways, hundreds of stories high» (Auster, 1989: 136). The American Renaissance, led by Thoreau, Poe, Hawthorne and Melville, or his adored Samuel Beckett are names that recurrently fill in the lines of his novels. Among these and other literary influences, Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) marks Auster's life and literary career and, more concretely, his reflection about solitude. Auster incorporates this idea to his texts in order to reflect about the act of writing and creativity:

Every book is an image of solitude. It is a tangible object that one can pick up, put down, open, and close, and its words represent many months, if not many years, of one man's solitude, so that with each word one reads in a book one might say to himself that he is confronting a particle of that solitude. A man sits alone in a room and writes. Whether the book speaks of loneliness or companionship, it is necessarily a product of solitude. (1989: 136)

Auster's universality also resides in his eclectic artistic career. It was in 1995 when he wrote the screenplay for the movie *Smoke*. This film shares a lot of recurrent elements of Auster's fiction such as the father-son relationship, the importance of Brooklyn as an urban space and the importance of the writer and the creative act. The movie, directed by Wayne Wang, won the Independent Spirit Award and meant the beginning of Auster's career as a film maker. His second movie, *Blue in the Face* (1996), as a continuation of *Smoke*, also recreates the Austerian universe in the city of New York. He wrote and directed two other movies, *Lulu on the Bridge* and *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*, which gave him a recognition as an independent film maker. In his last, unpublished interviews, he admitted he was longing to film another movie but the difficult search for budget and production became an insurmountable obstacle. Yet, his passion for cinema was very present throughout all his fiction and nonfiction work. Novels such as *The Book of Illusions* (2002) integrate plots and characters of movies that infiltrate the text, working as a singular influence.

Auster's postmodernity also includes different fictional experiments that make the Austerian universe particularly unique. He left the anti-detective fiction plot behind very soon to explore dystopian fiction in his second novel *In the Country of the Last Things* (1989) or the American Far West in *Mr. Vertigo* (1990). On the other hand, Auster's political concerns about democracy, freedom and marginalization were present in his work from the very beginning, aspects that become notorious in texts such as *Moon Palace* (1990), *The Music of Chance* (1991) or *Leviathan* (1992). Whereas Auster's pre-2000 fiction keeps the tone of most traditional American postmodernism, focused on metafiction, the urban space and the exploration of different literary genres, Auster's post-2000 fiction represents a new Austerian discourse. Thus, his fiction focuses on an American metaphysics and existentialism that explores the American identity from the transgression of the American traditional values. The culmination of this Austerian existentialism is reflected in his novel *The Brooklyn Follies* (2006), a novel that illustrates the life of the New Yorkers before the tragedy of 9/11 and the consequences the most terrible tragedy suffered by the city brought to people. Although most academic scholars have considered *The New York Trilogy* as Auster's masterpiece for decades, Auster still

had his masterpiece –or at least one of them– in progress, at this last stage of his career. In 2017 Auster published *4 3 2 1*, a complex and long fictional project that experiments with different alternatives in the life of the protagonist in the line of the Austerian concept of chance and the Chinese boxes technique, that is, a game with the story within the story. Undoubtedly, *4 3 2 1* is Auster's post-2000 fiction masterpiece and, as he claimed, the most important work of his life. We must also point out that Auster's last tribute to 19th-century American literature is his biography about the life and work of the American writer Stephen Crane. In *Burning Boy* (2021), he takes the reader into a fascinating journey through the short life and literary career of Stephen Crane. This long biography immersed Auster in years of research and different readings provoked by his ambition to bring Crane back to the literary public sphere. In June 2022, when Auster came to Spain to be awarded with the Honorary Degree at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, he was already writing what was going to be his last novel, even though he did not know it at that moment. After this last trip to Europe, Auster went back to New York to finish this last project he was so excited about. *Baumgartner* (2023) became, without him knowing it, a farewell letter to his readers.

This special issue of *Esferas Literarias* is a tribute to Paul Auster's universality and the heterogeneity of his literary space. The articles included in this volume discuss, from different perspectives, Auster's most important literary and artistic aspects in both his fiction and cinema. Jordi Massó's article «Paul Auster and the Magic of Writing Other Worlds» studies the use of magic and its relation to one of Auster's most important concept: chance. In his discussion, Massó proposes an innovative analysis in Auster's novels that links magic with memory, another topic present in Auster's works since the beginning of his literary career. Massó's study links both chance and memory to objects and the relevance they have in the creation of the different narrative layers, so recurrent in Auster's fiction. In this sense, Massó's most important contribution to Auster's literary criticism is his comparative analysis with Giordano Bruno's philosophy, another common intertextual reference of his fiction. Intertextuality and the dialogue with other contemporary writers are also analyzed by María Luisa Pascual Garrido in her article «Opacity in Auster and Rushdie: So Far, So Close». In her comparative analysis, Pascual Garrido finds a meeting point between Auster's and Rushdie's fiction, even though they could seem distant. From the perspective of critical transparency studies, the author analyzes textual opacity and the similarities in narrative strategies by both Auster and Rushdie, and their common understanding of literature as an alternative to chaos. In the same line of Auster's literary influences, Adrià Lacreu Sanmartín explores the influence Samuel Beckett had in Auster's fiction, concretely in his novel *The Book of Illusions*. Lacreu Sanmartín proposal in his article titled «“If I Never Saw the Moon, then the Moon Was Never There”: The Influence of Alan Schneider's and Samuel Beckett's *Film* on Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions*» is a comparative analysis between Auster's novel and Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider's movie *Film*, meant to explore how identity duplicity or the process of writing, central in Beckett and Schneider's movie, are also fundamental in Auster's fiction. The importance of poetry in Auster's fiction is studied by Mario Jurado Bonilla in the article «How Paul Auster's Poetry Got into the Locked Room: Interdependence of Poetry and Fiction in Auster's Early Work» in which he explores two types of intertextual influence. On the one hand, an internal intertextuality through which he argues the influence of Auster's poetry in the construction of characters and plots in his first novel *The New York Trilogy*. On the other hand, an external intertextuality represented in the influence Auster's fiction has from Paul Celan's poetry in relation to topics such as linguistic negation, fragmented syntax or symbolic minimalism, claiming that Auster's trilogy can be analyzed as an extension of Celan's

work. Dolores Resano's article «Vanishing Houses, Vanished Selves: A Hauntological Reading of Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*» focuses on 21st century Auster's fiction, more concretely on *Sunset Park* and how this novel tackles the 2007-2009 economic crisis and Barack Obama's first election. By discussing the importance of the concept of memory and the past, Resano proposes a hauntological reading that opens an affective narrative dimension in Auster's novel about the present in relation to the past. The last contribution of the issue is written by the poet Pablo García Casado who in a personal and fictional text narrates his experience with Auster's most intimate project, a radio program launched in 1999 that invited the audience of the National Public Radio to submit short stories about real events to display what he considered American true stories. García Casado reflects on the idea of authorship and how Auster transformed the listeners of his program into authors.

This academic approach to Auster's work represents an illustration of Auster's universality and the importance of his particular and personal fictionalization of postmodernity. From his very first texts of poetry and nonfiction to his most acclaimed fictional works, this special issue offers an academic approach to Auster's global and constant dialogue with different authors, works and artistic manifestations. Thus, this issue contributes significantly to the Austerian world that already belongs to its readers who, above all, have found a home between his lines.

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