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Travels in the Multilayered Fictional World
Paul Auster's Requiem for his Characters

HAYASHI Hikari

Introduction

Among the many interesting features of Paul Auster's 2006 novel, *Travels in the Scriptorium*, one of the most salient points is the reappearance of the characters of his previous oeuvre. Some reviewers evaluated the book negatively, dismissing it as merely "recycling" his previous characters (Royle), or as "hocus-pocus" (Barnacle). In this paper I object to these interpretations by considering the significance of the characters' reappearance and author's responsibility which the novel shows.

In contrast to those negative reviews, there are some critics who give greater attention to *Travels* and the entire "world" of Auster. Ginevra Geraci inquires into the authorship of Mr. Blank and argues that Mr. Blank is "a writer in recoil" (125), that is, "a weak author who has no longer control on his own characters, and a weak subject with a reduced ability to understand his situation and take action" (125).

In my thesis, I would like to demonstrate how this weakness is shown not only by the physical feebleness of Mr. Blank's aged body, but also by the reverse of the power balance between the author and the character. Michelle Banks provides an insight into Auster's fictional world(s), which she intentionally refrains from clearly defining, and suggests that "Auster builds up his text-actual, parallel world and extends its field even beyond the novels' combined authority" (159). Although I agree with her for the most part, my opinion is that Auster's narrative world is not a composite of plural worlds as Banks assumes, but a unified one. She says that these worlds are generated by each of his novels. Instead, I stress that Auster's fictional world has multiple layers that correspond to all of his works (By the word "layer," I mean a certain fictional level, smaller than a world). In a 2002 interview with Motoyuki Shibata, Auster said that the reader is invited to make connections between two books when the same name appears in both. We should, therefore, think about how this implies a world which includes his entire oeuvre. In addition, Aliki Varvogli points out how *Travels* shows "a preoccupation with the role of the American author in contemporary society, and the place of the novel in today's culture" (94) in comparison with Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost* (2007). From these critiques, we can see that *Travels* increasingly tends to provoke an argument about the nature of authorship. With this in mind I will consider how Auster's multilayered fictional world is produced through his works and why he wrote this novel which exhibits such a complicated world.

When he received the Prince of Asturias Award of Letters in 2006, the same year *Travels in the Scriptorium* was published, he made the following statement in his acceptance speech:

> [I]t is an odd way to spend your life – sitting alone in a room with a pen in your hand, hour after hour, day after day, year after year, struggling to put words on pieces of paper in order to give birth to what does not exist – except in your own head. Why on earth would anyone want to do such a thing? The only answer I have ever been able to come with is: because you have to, because you have no choice. ("Speech of acceptance")

From this, we can picture Auster sharing a very similar position with that of Mr. Blank. For this reason, when I use the word "author" for Mr. Blank, I see Auster himself through the figure of the character.

Furthermore, I would like to consider this novel as a turning point in his literary career so far. More specifically, he wrote *Travels in the Scriptorium* in order to review his previous oeuvre, to reconfirm his past for a new start, feeling guilty about his earlier characters because he forced unhappy fates on them. Accordingly, *Travels* is a requiem to bury them as words on a page, as ghost-like existences which will keep traveling in the fictional world. The word "requiem" usually means a kind of music for the repose of the souls of the dead, yet here I will use this word to denote a narrative for his previous characters, who are neither living nor dead, which allows them to achieve immortal forms in their books forever.

1. The Multilayered World of Auster

To begin with, I will illustrate how Auster's fictional world becomes multilayered. As for the word "multilayered," Auster himself used it in an interview: "I think my novels have tended to, more and more, be very multi-layered, and have several stories going on at once" ("The Book of Paul Auster"). The purpose of this section, then, is to make clear the multilayered system of his fictional world.

First, we should start by identifying the original texts that contain the characters who "reappear" in *Travels*. Anna is the narrator of *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), and Samuel Farr, the doctor, has a love affair with her in the same story. James P. Flood is merely mentioned once in Fanshawe's book, *Neverland*, which is described in *The Locked Room* (1986). Also, Sophie appears as Fanshawe's wife in this story. From *City of Glass* (1985), we find Daniel Quinn, as well as both Peter Stillman, Jr. and Sr. Benjamin Sachs, only mentioned by name, is a character in *Leviathan* (1992) and John Trause comes from *Oracle Night* (2003). All people and names in *Travels* are the characters of Auster's previous works, except for Mr. Blank and Sigmund Graf. Considering Farr's comment that the story about Graf was originally written by Trause, and the fact that this original story appears in *Oracle Night* as "The Empire of Bones," Graf, the protagonist, should be considered as one of the characters on a meta-fictional stage, which occupies a lower layer than the one which contains characters like

Trause.

Second, let us inquire into the significance of Mr. Blank. I am strongly inclined to believe that he was once the author of the works of Auster for two reasons: Mr. Blank's assigned treatment of retelling the story of Trause, and his memory as an author.

By the word "treatment," Farr means retelling the story written by Trause, who is one of the characters/operators sent by Mr. Blank. In other words, Mr. Blank must be able to take the place of the author Trause because Mr. Blank is the very person who created Trause and sent him for the "report" in the first place. What is important is that *Oracle Night* and other novels (which are not mentioned, but the readers can infer from the names of the reappearing characters) are published under Auster's name, but in *Travels* they are supposed to be "the reports" written by Mr. Blank, who is using the operators. The hypothesis that Mr. Blank was/is the author is also supported by the description of his remembrance of the old days:

> [H]e can dimly make out the contour of a man, a man who is undoubtedly himself, sitting at a desk and rolling a sheet of paper into an old manual typewriter. It's probably one of the reports, he says out loud, speaking in a soft voice, and then Mr. Blank wonders how many times he must have repeated that gesture, how many times over the years, understanding now that it was no fewer than thousands of times, thousands upon thousands of times, more sheets of paper than a man could possibly count in a day or a week or a month. (107-08)

From this passage, we see that Mr. Blank was formerly an author, particularly similar to Auster himself, which is easily deduced from the similarity between this paragraph and the speech quoted earlier. Furthermore, Mr. Blank's pleasure derived from creating a story underpins his suitability for writing:

> A new idea has entered his [Mr. Blank's] head, a fiendish, devastating illumination that sends a wave of pleasure shuddering through his body from the very toes on his feet to the nerve cells in his brain. (111)

Therefore, Mr. Blank is the author's substitute whose standpoint in this novel can be said to be almost directly derived from Auster himself.

Next, let us consider Fanshawe. He used to be an author in the previous novel, *The Locked Room*, and this time appears as an author, too:

> Travels in the Scriptorium
> by
> N. R. Fanshawe
>
> Aha, Mr. Blank says out loud. That's more like it. Maybe we're finally getting somewhere, after all.
>
> Then he turns to the first page and begins to read:
>
> The old man sits on the edge of the narrow bed [. . .]. (126)

After the last sentence of this quotation, the same paragraphs as the first ones of the book are repeated. This uncanny event indicates a reversal between the standpoint of Mr. Blank as the author and that of Fanshawe as a character. Here Fanshawe is given the special role to write his own creator, Mr. Blank, in the opposite direction. To clearly visualize this process I propose that we should view the narrative as a Chinese-box-like system which has three layers, the biggest one is Fanshawe's, the middle Mr. Blank's, and the smallest the manuscript in Mr. Blank's room, which is, however, essentially the same as the biggest one. See fig. 1.

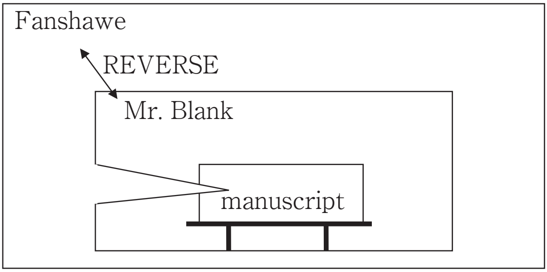

Fig. 1.

The manuscript about Mr. Blank is in this room, but this manuscript is written from the viewpoint of the author, i.e. Fanshawe, who watches Mr. Blank from a higher level, because Mr. Blank is written into it. Compared with metafiction, which consists of plural narrative stages, Auster's fictional world has a salient feature that enables the narrative frames to reverse themselves.

Another interesting point about this reverse lies at the end of the novel:

> It will never end. For Mr. Blank is one of us now, and struggle though he might to understand his predicament, he will always be lost. I believe I speak for all his charges when I say he is getting what he deserves [. . .]. (129)

The word "us" in the first line may refer to the characters who now adopt the standpoint of observing Mr. Blank. His perspective is finally incorporated in that of the characters'. It is the deprivation of Mr. Blank's vantage point as the author which yields that position to the "us."

Let us consider the links with Auster's previous novels, shown by Anna, Sophie and Quinn. These connections also represent a collision of the layers which belong to his previous works. These reappearing characters complicate Auster's fictional world by implying another story layer, the existence of which is inevitably brought to our attention precisely through their reappearance. This further complication is depicted in fig. 2.

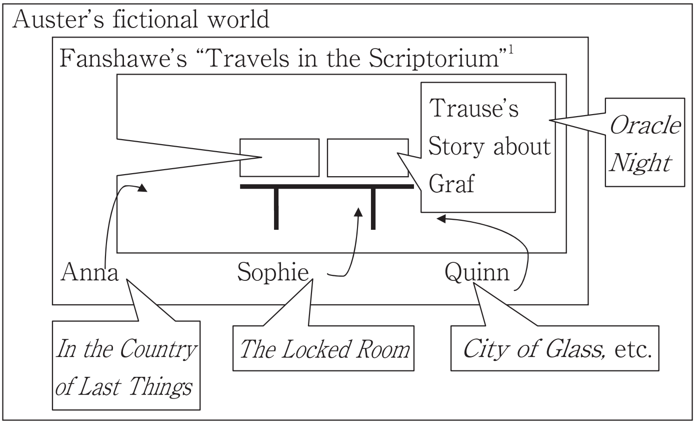
Auster's fictional world
Fanshawe's "Travels in the Scriptorium"1
Trause's Story about Graf
Oracle Night
Anna
Sophie
Quinn
In the Country of Last Things
The Locked Room
City of Glass, etc.

Fig. 2.

Those three boxes at the bottom show that the reappearing characters bring their original fictional layers into *Travels*. I locate these boxes between the biggest layer, that is, Auster's entire fictional world, and the next biggest one, Fanshawe's "Travels in the Scriptorium", because only their names are mentioned, not the titles of the works within which they appear. As for Trause, it is clear that the story about Graf is derived from "The Empire of Bones" in *Oracle Night* by which another story layer is incorporated. Of course these links would only be noted by the readers who have read Auster's other works. In this sense, *Travels* urges us to look back over his whole oeuvre again. It can be said that one of his intentions is to make both the reader and the author conscious of the interrelation of the works so far.

Moreover, each layer is a result of an act of "writing." For instance, the two manuscripts on Mr. Blank's desk, "Travels in the Scriptorium" by N. R. Fanshawe and the story about Graf as well, are connected respectively to the other layers. Auster is an author who is extraordinarily obsessive about "writing," as we have seen in his earlier works like *The New York Trilogy*. At the risk of oversimplifying, he makes his narrative world more and more complicated by increasing the number of descriptions of "writing" and "reading" manuscripts or notebooks.

Based on the above argument, I draw the tentative conclusion that Auster makes one fictional world from all of his literary works, and it is composed of a multilayered system like a so-called Chinese-box, which consists of plural stages of writing. This feature is demonstrated especially in *Travel* as it is filled with several links that remind readers of his previous works.

Furthermore, the readers can "travel" in this multilayered world when reading this novel. In other words, *Travels in the Scriptorium* helps us to travel in Auster's fictional world freely, with the author who brings us on the journey, even though he physically remains in a small locked room. Moreover, it is clear from fig. 2 that the characters can travel between these layers, too.

2. Requiem for his Characters

In Chapter 1 we have already considered the significance of the reappearance of previous characters, so now I would like to demonstrate the specific reason why they were selected. In order to explain this, we should divide them into three groups in terms of their attitudes to Mr. Blank, i.e. their creator.

The first group is the more compassionate one: Anna and Sophie. Their attitudes can be simply shown in the following remark by Sophie: "I'm one of few people around here who's on your side, but if you won't cooperate, I can think of at least a dozen men who'd be happy to come in here and force these pills down your throat" (96). Here we see not only her sympathy for Mr. Blank, but also the existence of the second group, which poses a threat to Mr. Blank's life. More specifically, Mr. Blank thinks of those two women intimately, even to the extent of having them perform some sexual services for him. For instance, Anna seems to be "a new mother for him" (25-26), and does not mind bringing him to orgasm after seeing his erection. As for Sophie, he asks her, "[a]re you the little girl I kissed at the pond when I was ten years old?" (91) (she also allows him to touch her breasts).

The second group is the more antagonistic one which is represented by James P. Flood. He has hostile feelings for Mr. Blank, and even a desire to murder him, from the standpoint of one of more minor characters in his works. He complains about how trivially he has been dealt with:

> I might be ridiculous, Flood says, with anger rising in his voice, but you, Mr. Blank . . . you're cruel . . . cruel and indifferent to the pain of others. You play with people's lives and take no responsibility for what you've done. (53)

He accuses Mr. Blank of having too arrogant an attitude as he discriminates between the important characters like the first group and the smaller characters like Flood. In response to his remarks, Mr. Blank expresses guilt and remorse. This single action summarizes what the entire novel is all about, that is, to appease the characters that had been abused by him so far.

The third is the moderators' group, which includes Farr and Quinn. These two characters play important roles in developing the story. Samuel Farr, as a doctor, poses an assignment of thinking out the rest of Trause's story to Mr. Blank. At the same time, he gives advice to Mr. Blank when he is tormented by "figment beings," saying "[j]ust keep your eyes open, Mr. Blank, and they won't be there anymore" (80-81). This means that Mr. Blank should not be held captive entirely by his old memory or guilty feeling. Rather Farr encourages him to look directly at what he has done in the past, as well as what he can do now. As for Quinn, Mr. Blank easily shows his friendliness because Quinn is the most frequently-appearing character in Auster's works:

for instance, *City of Glass*, *In the Country of Last Things* and *Mr. Vertigo* (1994). Mr. Blank trusts him and thus Quinn assumes the role of a lawyer. Mr. Blank says to Quinn, "I always felt I could trust you" (121). Then Quinn replies, "You can, Mr. Blank. That's why I was given the job. Because we go so far back together" (121). As a lawyer, Quinn has a bundle of files which contain information on the characters, such as Benjamin Sachs, and tells him about the charges raised against him like conspiracy, defamation and homicide. This means that Quinn is given a special role in which he has some authority over the other characters. From this, we can guess that the author is conscious of the level of importance assigned to the characters, and that both Farr and Quinn are, accordingly, the mediators of all characters.

Let us consider a key concept: Mr. Blank's "guilty feeling" toward the characters, which is repeatedly described throughout the story. When he feels guilty, it is always in relation to his concerns over what he has done to his characters. For example:

> An instant after thinking these thoughts [about Anna], he is attacked by a fresh wave of guilt, and he knows that Anna is dead. Even worse, he suspects that he is responsible for her death. It might even be, he tells himself, that he was the person who killed her. (4)

From these remarks, we can see the reason for his sense of guilt, that is, for his severe behavior towards his characters' fates. Feeling strong guilt toward the characters, of whom he is not sure if they are alive or not, Mr. Blank starts to be haunted by their shadows:

> The moment he shuts his eyes, he sees the shadow-beings marching through his head. [. . .] All he knows is that the mere sight of these figments fills him with dread, and once again he is overwhelmed by an implacable sense of guilt. He speculates that these people are the ones he sent off on various missions over the

> years, and, as was the case with Anna, perhaps some of them, or many of them, or all of them did not fare so terribly well, even to the point of being subjected to unbearable suffering and/or death. (38)

He feels a sense of dread more and more as the novel proceeds, and starts to feel afraid of becoming his "victims'" target of revenge:

> Mr. Blank closed his eyes in order to concentrate on the task at hand, but blocking out the room and his immediate surroundings has the disturbing effect of summoning forth the procession of figment beings who marched through his head at earlier points in the narrative. [. . .] My victims. All the people I've made suffer over the years. They're coming after me now to take their revenge. (80-81)

Mr. Blank experiences feelings of guilt because he has sent people out on dangerous missions, and many of them have died or been hurt. However, he also defends his actions by telling himself that he just did what he had to do, and that his job to seek out the truth is more important than anything else. In any case, we understand that this novel is very conscious about the relationship between the characters and the author (who is Mr. Blank and at the same time Auster himself), and that the reason for guilty feelings stems from the author's arbitrary decision about the characters' fates.

In the latter half of this novel, more reversals happen between the authoritarian author and the ghost-like characters. We have already looked at Fanshawe's writing about Mr. Blank, but there are additional elements that show the reversed standpoints between the composition of the old and physically feeble author and the rebellious characters.

First, we have to look at the confinement of Mr. Blank through the efforts of the characters. This represents one of the reversals as the characters have control over the author Mr. Blank. He is continuously wondering if he is actually locked in the room or not:

> Or, even more likely, that he [Farr] didn't bother to lock it, knowing he would have no trouble overpowering Mr. Blank if his prisoner tried to escape. [. . .] And he [Mr. Blank], who is nothing if not pessimistic about his prospects for the future, once again resigns himself to living in a state of constant uncertainty. (88)

He remains uncertain until the end of the novel whether he is locked or not, nor does he understand the situation of being in "the locked room" that one can view as being connected with Auster's prior novel, *The Locked Room*. We then notice that Fanshawe who locked himself in a room now locks another man in, which directly shows the reversal between the character and the author.

Second, Mr. Blank becomes more and more dependent on the compassionate characters: for instance, he says to Sophie that "I've been waiting for hours to see her [Anna] again. That woman is everything to me. I can't live without her" (91). This remark illustrates how he is beginning to accept his situation where he is under the characters' control.

Third, a sudden crisis occurs in Mr. Blank's cloudy mind: "They've poisoned me! Mr. Blank shouts, once the onslaught is over. The monsters have poisoned me!" (106). This outburst occurs because he thinks that his nausea comes from the pills he was forced to take. He realizes that he can no longer resist the group who controls his schedule. Moreover, considering this time schedule, we may observe the interesting fact that only the characters have wrist watches, and that Mr. Blank has neither a watch nor a clock in his room. Also through some interruptions from phone calls, he is totally under the time-control of the characters.

The change of the labels is another sign that Mr. Blank is losing his dominance over the characters.

> After a thorough investigation, he is horrified to discover that not a single label occupies its former spot. The wall now reads CHAIR. The lamp now reads BATHROOM. The chair now reads DESK. (103)

From this, one might say that he lost even the power to control his language, which used to be so familiar to him as an author. He takes great pains to retrieve his control, namely, "return[ing] each one of the scrambled labels to its proper spot" (105). This action is also described as "a symbolic undertaking to restore harmony to a broken universe" (106). Along with this event he starts to use the word "enemy":

> An enemy is stalking the premises, Mr. Blank says to himself, perhaps several or many of them working in league with one another, and their only intention is to frighten him, to disorient him, to make him think he is losing his mind, and as if they were trying to persuade him that the shadow-beings lodged in his head had transformed themselves into living phantoms, bodiless souls conscripted to invade his little room and cause as much havoc as possible. (104)

Here we can see the word "enemy" is used as a synonym for "the shadow-beings" and that they become "living phantoms," which equals what is happening to the characters. One can say that the characters are the half-dead and half-living existence haunting their creator, Mr. Blank. There is a need, therefore, to bury them properly, offering a "requiem." Mr. Blank, who has no power over them, plays the role of a substitute for the real author Auster, in order to formally transfer the priority toward the characters, proposing a paradox in the end. The following remark allows the characters to gain control over their author:

> Without him [Mr. Blank], we are nothing, but the paradox is that we, the figments of another mind, will outlive the mind that made

> us, for once we are thrown into the world, we continue to exist forever, and our stories go on being told, even after we are dead. (129)

As a conclusion for this section, we can say that this novel is a requiem from Auster to his characters in order to show his pity for them and an attempt to reverse the power balance that typically exists between an author and the characters he or she produces. This power of the characters includes the ability to travel among the fictional layers initially generated by the author, as they go in and out of Mr. Blank's room.

Conclusion

Paul Auster creates his multilayered fictional world from all of his literary works. The most important feature of *Travels in the Scriptorium* is the reappearance of previous characters and it helps us understand this complicated fictional world. Each character who reappears has a need to be given a "requiem," which means that the author buries his characters as the beings haunting the pages of his books. Auster shows pity for them by making clear their higher position over the author, borrowing the figure of Mr. Blank, in order to correct the relationship.

Travels in the Scriptorium is the very work that shows Auster's special concern over his characters and the links between his works. By offering them a "requiem," Auster tries to make the characters live forever as words that he writes on a page. Auster's belief in the everlasting power of the novel can be seen in the same speech that I have quoted in my introduction:

> Numbers [of the readers] don't count where books are concerned – for there is only one reader, each and every time only one reader. That explains the particular power of the novel, and why in my opinion, it will never die as a form. ("Speech")

This remark matches Auster's intention to reverse the relationship between the author and the characters and to posit them in a special place where they can never die. I feel that for this purpose he was entirely successful. This novel can, therefore, be considered as a turning point of his writing career. *Travels in the Scriptorium* is the novel that enables Auster and us the readers as well to review and reconfirm what he has done so far, in order to make a new start. The word "travel," then, can be applied to the three classes' – the author's, the readers', and the characters' – travels in the multilayered fictional world of Auster.

Note

1. I will use quotation marks when I refer to Fanshawe's manuscript, "Travels in the Scriptorium"; on the other hand, I will use italics when I mean Paul Auster's book, *Travels in the Scriptorium*.

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