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## Writing to “You”:

The Author’s Self and the Unreachable Other in Paul Auster’s Later Novels

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I am writing to you because you know nothing. Because you are far away from me and know nothing.

—Paul Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*

### Introduction

Paul Auster’s novels are filled with characters who write. Beginning with Daniel Quinn, who records his pseudo-detective experiences in his notebook, each story in *The New York Trilogy* (1987) transforms itself from a detective story into a story about writing and being a writer. *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) is itself a long letter written by its heroine, Anna. Peter Aaron, the narrator of *Leviathan* (1992), writes about his friend Benjamin Sachs, who is also a writer. After entering the twenty-first century, the protagonists in Auster’s novels continue to write and to engage with the writings of others’: David Zimmer in *The Book of Illusion* (2002) writes a book about a silent-movie actor, as a step in his process of recovery from a long illness; Nathan Glass in *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005) begins his quest to escape from the miserable life of a divorced, cancerous, job-less man by writing what he calls “The Book of Human Folly.” These writer-characters confront their writings seriously, as something that has weight and significance in their lives; sometimes the purpose of writing is to record of their experiences; sometimes it is a way to recover from inertia.

Many critics consider this inclination to focus on writing and writer-characters one of the key features of Auster’s fiction. As early as 1995, Dennis Barone entitled an edited collection of essays on Auster’s works, *Beyond the Red Note-*

book, indicating the importance of the notebook as a metaphor for Auster's fiction making. In a recent book, *Paul Auster's Writing Machine* (2014), Evija Trofimova argues that the process of writing is important in Auster's novels, focusing on the tools his writer-characters use, such as typewriters. Some of the most sophisticated remarks about his writing have been made by Aliko Varvogli. In her 2001 work, *The World That is the Book*, she points out that the act of writing, which Auster depicts, has a deep connection to the way in which one finds the "other" in one's own self. In discussing Anna, the letter-writing heroine of *In the Country of Last Things*, Varvogli comments:

The writer, at her most solitary, needs to imagine herself as other. The gesture implies an acknowledgement of the fact that even writing about oneself is an act of representation in which, inevitably, the self becomes other. The moment the self is articulated, it is mediated through the written word, and it ceases to be pure subject; representation is by its very nature alienating, and the moment something is conceived in words it becomes subject and object at the same time. Hence Auster's frequent quoting of Rimbaud's dictum 'je est un autre.' (96)

She observes that writing, for Auster, is a process of transforming one's self into an "other"—the object of one's writing—and concisely points out that this otherness of oneself is a feature of Auster's writings. As Anna estranges herself as an "other" in her letter writing, so Auster must objectify his author self through the writer-characters in his novels, as if putting in front of himself a mirror that produces an image of the "other," which is almost identical to himself, but exists in a different dimension. The phrase from Arthur Rimbaud's letters, "Je est un autre"—I is an other—is one of Auster's favorite sayings, repeatedly cited in his works.<sup>1</sup> It aptly expresses the way he defines the existence called "other"; the ultimate other is "myself." Auster then picks up his pen to write about this mysterious "me" as "other."

This perception of the "other" as "oneself" drives his first story collection, *The New York Trilogy*. It explores the process of mirroring that duplicates the self, creating an "other." The three stories in this trilogy seek to illustrate different stages in the act of facing a mirror, a process that produces the "other" as one's

double. The most characteristic feature of this mirroring process is its strong connection to the act of writing. In both *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*, the protagonists excessively propagate their mirror-imaged others, using pseudonyms and masks when confronting physical others in whom they also find themselves mirrored. As they fail to be themselves, their writings collapse. Quinn's red notebook, used for jotting down small pieces of information and thoughts that relate to his pseudo-detective work, finally becomes impossible, when he is trapped in a room. Blue in *Ghosts* gradually notices that the reports he is writing about his target are leading toward failure; he ends up breaking into his target's room to find and destroy the manuscript about himself. Their identities are duplicated and propagated as they encounter physical others, through a process exacerbated by their excessive use of false names and disguises. Surrounded by overly propagated mirror-imaged others, both protagonists end up erased by an anonymous meta-author: at the end of both stories, the narrator becomes visible, talking in the first person about the narrative, in which he does not know (or care) where the two protagonists are headed ("As for Quinn, it is impossible for me to say where he is now" [133]; "Where he [Blue] goes after that is not important" [198]).

*The Locked Room*, on the other hand, has the stable presence of an I-narrator (who is writing the entire story) and a physical other, his friend Fanshawe. This is clear from the first sentences that there is still the suggestion of a mirroring relationship between them: "It seems to me now that Fanshawe was always there. He is the place where everything begins for me, and without him I would hardly know who I am" (201). The mirrored correspondence between the two characters forms a foundation for all of the stories in this trilogy. As the narrator reminisces that "[t]hese three stories are finally the same story, but each one represents a different stage in my awareness of what it is about" (294), he alludes to his relationship with Fanshawe as his mirror-imaged other, an association that the protagonists in the previous two stories have struggled against in vain. The plot that one writer (the unnamed first-person narrator) writes about another writer (Fanshawe) is a more solid repetition of the relationship between Blue and Black, and the new stage that this third story achieves shows the writer locking his mirror-imaged other in a room inside himself and attempting to maintain his authority as a writer who writes *about* the other, without surrendering his authority to the writings *of* the other. The narrator, who inherited and pub-

lished Fanshawe's manuscript and is attempting to write his biography, finally acquires Fanshawe's last notebook and destroys it in the last scene. He remains the author of his narration, which inevitably contains the "other" figure (in this case, Fanshawe) who is so close to himself that he confusingly takes Fanshawe to be the other half of himself.

The problem of producing an image of the other, and its relation to the act of writing, does not end here; rather it becomes a chronic symptom, which haunts every later work of Auster's. The repeated appearances of writer-characters in his novels underline their importance. However, it is both possible and necessary to recognize the big difference between these later works and *Trilogy*, and also to acknowledge subtle differences among the later works. The key to interpreting this transformation of the idea of the other and its relation to the act of writing is *unreachability*: the unbridgeable gap that exists between the writer and his written characters. What is lacking in Varvogli's interpretation of the self and other in the process of writing is the contradictory desire to pursue and nullify the unreachability between metafictional narrative layers. Auster's later works are a journey of searching for this unreachable other. This is a feature that his earlier works, including *Trilogy*, do not have. *Trilogy* hints at the unreachability of the other, to be sure, but the other is something reproduced by the process of mirroring to create a physical antagonist or recipient, rather than a clearly metafictional figure. The unreachability that marks his later works reflects a pure process of writing and being written about. Auster's disease, as I would call it, manifests in this endless fear of becoming something written, in the everlasting negotiation with written characters, and the repeated impulse to discard the written text. This paper aims to examine the representation of unreachable others through the narrative device of metafiction that characterizes Auster's later works. *Oracle Night* (2003), *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006), *Man in the Dark* (2008), and *Invisible* (2009) provide us with profound opportunities to consider this unreachability between a writer and his characters in several different ways. Using their metafictional construction as a clue, since it can be considered the mirror image of Auster's own novel-writing process, an exploration of the writer-characters in these novels can reveal the place that Auster has reached through his career, and provide an answer to the question of what it means to be an author.

### Denial of the Unreachable Metafictional World: *Oracle Night*

According to Larry McCaffery, the narrative mode of metafiction was born in the sixties from a postmodern ironical perspective that argued, "[f]iction cannot hope to *mirror* reality or tell the truth because 'reality' and 'truth' are themselves fictional abstractions whose validity has become increasingly suspect" (5; emphasis added). He claims that novels of the era "include a reflexive irony which mocks the realistic claims of artistic significance and truth: they also insist that the reader accept the work as an invented, purely made-up entity." These works become metafictions. Compared to the novelists McCaffery cites (Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass), Paul Auster, writing a generation later, in 1985, seems to use this narrative tool for a different reason: to *mirror* the reality of a writer who makes fiction. It is not out of a sense of irony but as a sincere attempt to reach reality that Auster uses this narrative tool inherited from the postmodern experimentalists.

*Oracle Night* is a good example of one of Auster's reality-oriented metafictional novels. It starts with Sidney Orr's first-person recollection of how he recovers from an illness and begin writing again. As he explains the story he is about to write, his paragraphs have long footnotes, explaining, for example, how he makes one of the characters in the story resemble his wife Grace (14-18, footnote 3), and providing background information about his life (for instance, introducing his friend John Trause [24, footnote 4], and his wife's work [48-51, footnote 6]). The story Sidney is writing, about a protagonist named Nick Bowen, is thus sandwiched between Sidney's I-narration of the steps he took to develop the plot (the body) and additional details about his present and past situation (footnotes). At this point, Sidney seems to be in a complete control of what he is writing.

At another moment, however, he loses control of Nick's story:

I opened the notebook, and when I glanced down at the page in front of me, I realized that I was lost, that I didn't know what I was doing anymore. I had put Bowen into the room. I had locked the door and turned out the light, and now I didn't have the faintest idea of how to get him out of there. (92)

Sidney's writing comes to a dead end when he loses control of his characters. The image of the locked door is one of the metaphors Auster retains from *The Locked Room*, although here it is used to illustrate the unreachability that exists between writer and character, rather than between two people who live in the same world. In other words, it embodies the separation between Sidney the author and the metafictional other world that he reproduces by mirroring his own world.

Sidney attempts to break through his writer's block simply by destroying his written pages:

One by one, I ripped the pages out of the blue notebook and tore them into little pieces. Flitcraft and Bowen, the rant about the dead baby in the Bronx, my soap opera version of Grace's love life—everything went into the garbage bag. After a short pause, I decided to tear up the blank pages and then shoved them into the bag as well. (187)

The stories that Sidney scribbled in the pages of his notebook, including the hypothesis about his wife's affair and an extension of a newspaper article, are easily eliminated by the simple act of tearing out physical pages. One can consider this to be a definitive action by the controlling author. Sidney discards not only the written pages but also unwritten ones. This means that he is anticipating the annulment of what he will write in the future. It is his way of taking responsibility for the stories he writes as an author.

However, this is not really a solution; the door remains locked. For Sidney, Nick remains unreachable. Instead, it is the moment when the controlling, authoritative author gives up what he has written. As Sidney cannot find a way out by means of his own words, he chooses instead to be one of the characters in Auster's *Oracle Night*. Through the duplicity in Sidney's writing, and his abandonment and use of authorial rights, *Oracle Night* presents the author as a figure swaying between his own limitations and advantages, and realizing his helplessness in the face of the self-made unreachable other that is his metafictional world.

### **Attempted Suicides of the Author: *Travels in the Scriptorium* and *Man in the Dark***

Auster further explores his negotiations between authorship and its restricted ability to reach out to others by introducing old, enfeebled writer-characters in his next two novels. Mr. Blank in *Travels in the Scriptorium* and August Brill in *Man in the Dark* are alike in having both once been professional writers, whose weakened bodies now prevent them from writing as they used to. They are alone with their own imaginations, apart from other people who go in and out of their involuntary confinement. Aliko Varvogli has appropriately described such old men as "ailing authors," reflecting that "the weak, impotent, leaking body is an apt image for the fate of the American writer at the beginning of the twenty-first century" after 9.11 ("Ailing Authors" 96; she also cites, as an example of an enfeebled author-character, Nathan Zuckerman in Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost* [2007]). In concluding that "[t]he author may be ailing, but it seems he is not yet dead" (100), she is clearly framing a response, not only to post-9.11 America, but also to the French poststructuralists' notion of the death of the author. In this, she agrees with John Zilcosky, whose countering argument first mentioned Auster's "challenge" to the concept of the theoretical death of the author (196). If so, why did Auster create such narrowly-undead writer-characters? Was it really to counter the poststructuralist concept of the theoretical death of the author? Could it not be considered his *surrender* to the death sentence? In order to answer these questions about authorship, it is useful to focus again on the unreachability of the other, since Auster's writer-characters struggle against their characters with a metafictional world composed only of this unreachability, not only from the author's side but also from the characters' side. This section investigates a fundamental contradiction: that the writer wishes both for his own death and to be an author in his writings, acknowledging the two-way unreachability between the author and his characters.

In *Travels in the Scriptorium*, Auster imagines Mr. Blank as an old version of himself,<sup>2)</sup> at the end of his writing career, being visited one after another by characters from his earlier works: Anna from *In the Country of Last Things*, Quinn from *City of Glass*, and Sophie from *The Locked Room*. Mr. Blank, howev-



er, scarcely notices that they are his creations, or that he is confined in a small room, watched and recorded by them.

At one moment, one of these characters, Samuel Farr, orders Mr. Blank to complete a story as a treatment. The story, Farr explains, has been half finished by another writer-character, John Trause.<sup>3)</sup> Mr. Blank reads this uncompleted manuscript, and then invents the rest of it in his head, speaking aloud to himself. The main character of this story-within-a-story is Sigmund Graf, who is told to write a report on a massacre that has just happened. Mr. Blank makes up a plot in which Graf's report is exploited as a false declaration of war, and he is forced to kill himself because of this misrepresentation:

He [Graf] understands now how cruelly he's been tricked. War on this scale could potentially destroy the Confederation, and it turns out that he, and he alone, was the match that ignited this deadly fire. . . . That evening, in the darkness of his empty house, he picks up a loaded revolver and fires a bullet through his skull. And that's it. End of story. *Finità, la commedia.* (115)

Mr. Blank finishes this story at the point when Graf commits suicide, as if giving up his character and fictional world entirely. The last three cynical sentences, calling the story a comedy, reveal a type of ridicule that derives from the author's dominance over his characters. The author, Mr. Blank, can finish the story and the character's life any way he wants to. This forced ending is very similar to the action that Sidney takes in *Oracle Night*: ending a story by force, through a single authorial act. Thus, it seems that characters never have the opportunity to reach their creator.

Remember, however, that Mr. Blank is confined to a room against his will, with nothing to do but wait for visits from the characters of his previous novels. This situation demonstrates that it is not the characters but Mr. Blank himself who lacks the agency to reach the other side. This undermines the apparent dominance of the author over his characters in Graf's story. The overthrow of authorship is illustrated most clearly in the final scene, which clarifies the present status of the writer-character Mr. Blank.

The author Mr. Blank, who killed Graf without even bothering to write it down, is exposed to the predicament of authorship by the characters who watch

and visit him. Mr. Blank's confinement in the room and his status—under the management of his characters—suggest his weakness, both as a man and as an author. He repeatedly asks himself whether the door of the room is locked, but never learns the answer. The reader knows, however, that it is genuinely locked, when one of his characters eventually takes advantage of the situation and narrates Mr. Blank. The narrator explains that Mr. Blank's confinement is a manifestation of the characters' ambivalent feeling about him, which include both vengeance and generosity:

Mr. Blank might have acted cruelly toward some of his charges over the years, but not one of us thinks he hasn't done everything in his power to serve us well. That is why I plan to keep him where he is. The room is his world now, and the longer the treatment goes on, the more he will come to accept the generosity of what has been done for him. Mr. Blank is old and enfeebled, but as long as he remains in the room with the shuttered window and the locked door, he can never die, never disappear, never be anything but the words I am writing on his page. (129-30)

The "us" is the characters who watch and visit Mr. Blank, and the "I" is one of those characters. Given the scene immediately before this appearance of the I-narrator, in which Mr. Blank finds the manuscript entitled "Travels in the Scriptorium by N. R. Fanshawe," it is natural to assume that this "I" is Fanshawe, the writer-character of *The Locked Room*. Mr. Blank is confined to the locked room, transformed into "the words I am writing on his page," that is, into a mere character. The locked room is thus a metaphor for the page, and his confinement is a metaphor for being written; another author who has power to manipulate him is outside the room/page.

It is through this recurring motif of the locked room that Auster continues to negotiate with his own authorship and the unreachability it involves. In *Oracle Night*, Sidney locks his character Nick Bowen into a basement room, and then erases that situation by tearing up the pages, without giving Nick a way out. In other words, the writer Sidney makes his own character unreachable by using a lock. Now in *Travels in the Scriptorium*, there is a crucial reversing of author and character, as the author is locked in by the characters. The lock that confines Mr.

Blank, and enables the characters to manage him and keep him separate, represents the unreachability between the characters and their author. The killing of Graf by Mr. Blank is replicated as the half-killing of Mr. Blank by Fanshawe. Given that these writer-characters are Auster's mirror-imaged "others," reproduced through his writing process, it is suggested that this repetition is a sequence of suicide attempts by the author. This suicide, however, is not carried out, but only attempted, because Mr. Blank is not completely dead at the end of the story. Auster presents the figure of an old writer-character again, in his next novel, as if reconsidering the death sentence he gave himself.

*Man in the Dark* treads almost the same path as *Travels in the Scriptorium*: a plot in which an ailing author puts his character in a dead end, until the character introduces doubt about the effectiveness of an author's one-sided control over his characters. The protagonist is another old man who has been a writer, August Brill. He has lost the ability to stand up or walk, and can only lie still in his bed, telling himself an invented story. His protagonist is named Owen Brick; the story begins with Owen's discovery that he cannot extricate himself from a hole he is in. This image of "the man in the hole" inevitably resonates with Auster's characters in locked rooms, creating the same unreachability; Owen Brick, like Nick Bowen and Mr. Blank, is unable to get out without action from the outside.

August Brill's peculiar plan is to make his protagonist (Owen Brick) kill his creator, who is Brill himself. He introduces himself into the story as the culprit who invented Owen Brick and a parallel world occupied with war. Another character, Lou Frisk, explains to Owen that Brill has made up the war by "telling himself the story in his head." He also says that Owen has been ordered "to kill him [Brill]" (70). Owen says, "So now it's a suicide," and Lou Frisk answers, "In a roundabout way, yes" (70). To further explain this "suicide," Brill himself says:

This story is about a man who must kill the person who created him, and why pretend that I am not that person? By putting myself into the story, the story becomes real. Or else I become unreal, yet one more figment of my own imagination. (102)

Here again is an example of the "reality-oriented" metafiction of Auster. To em-

bed the writer himself into his story is to make the story more real, not to reveal its fictionality. At the same time, it presents the author's life as a "figment of the imagination." August Brill chooses voluntarily to have an imaginary life, unlike Mr. Blank, who eventually finds himself in that condition.

However, this suicide is never accomplished. Brill makes Owen Brick reluctant to fulfill his mission to kill his creator, and delays the event as long as possible. Then, since Owen keeps refusing to kill the author, Owen himself is killed in the end. Owen's death parallels Brill's life in a very cynical way:

And this is the end of Owen Brick, who leaves the world in silence, with no chance to say a last word or think a last thought.

Meanwhile, seventy-five miles to the northwest, in a white wooden house in southern Vermont, August Brill is awake, lying in bed and staring into the dark. And the war goes on. (118)

While the character is killed, the author is still alive. Even though he created the plot involving the author's suicide, Brill chooses not to kill himself at the last moment. He makes the excuse that his subject is the war, and he must not soften the blow, adding: "The only solution is to leave Brick behind me, make sure that he gets a decent burial, and then come up with another story" (118). Brill's betrayal creates a definitive contrast to Mr. Blank's silenced confinement. *Man in the Dark* ends with a rather happy atmosphere: Brill talks with his daughter about their future the next morning. His confinement and immobility are resolved with the help of his daughter and a crutch. The final phrase, "the weird world rolls on" (a quote from Rose Hawthorne's poem), suggests an affirmation of the uncontrollability of the world. After failing to commit suicide as an author, Brill views his extended life optimistically, as if forgetting about his dead character. By shifting the emphasis from his relationship with his characters to physical others, his daughter and granddaughter, who *reach* him in the room, Brill tries to forget that he is the author.

The struggles of the writer-characters in these two novels show how Auster aggravates the illness of authorship and attempts two roundabout suicides, which he decides not to commit at the last moment. He keeps these two ailing authors alive, confined in his books, as Fanshawe does with Mr. Blank. The death

of the author, diagnosed by the French poststructuralist theorists, is both accepted and rejected in Auster, taking the form of an attempted suicide, in which he tries to kill his author-self but ultimately refuses to do it. The unreachability between author and character, so peculiar to Auster, keeps the door locked and prevents the author from being killed. In other words, because of this unreachability, his ailing authors survive. As the final scene of *Man in the Dark* illustrates, Auster chooses to keep negotiating with his authorship. In his next novel, *Invisible*, Auster comes back to the relationship between two male writer-friends, after these suicidal nights, in order to reexamine that setting and reestablish another relationship between the writer and the written.

### **Afterlife of the Author: *Invisible***

*Invisible* is narrated by Jim Freeman, who has collected the manuscripts of his old friend Adam Walker. The male friendship between Jim and Adam is similar to the relationship between the I-narrator and Fanshawe in *The Locked Room*, or between Peter Aaron and Benjamin Sachs in *Leviathan*: the physically unreachable relationship between two male writer-characters is repeated. Jim receives by mail the manuscripts that Adam wrote about his experiences in 1967; as Jim was flying to see his old friend on the other side of the United States (Jim is in Manhattan and Adam in Oakland, California), he learns that Adam passed away a few days earlier. He then again receives the only copy of the last part of Adam's manuscript, which he edits and revises into a complete story. The receipt of pages written by a friend is an often repeated theme in Auster's oeuvre; examples include *The Locked Room* and *Leviathan*. Jim's writing about Adam is, however, different from the writing of the I-narrator about Fanshawe in *The Locked Room* or Peter Aaron's writing about Benjamin Sachs; it differs in the amount of time the "main" I-narrator gives over to the other person's story. Jim, the manager of the whole story, first appears in the second quarter of the novel. He explains why and how he acquired the manuscript written by his long-lost friend Adam; he does not interrupt Adam's narration with any manifestations of his own fictive creativity or details of his own life. Jim's passive attitude is shown best in the sentences below, where he explains his understanding of authorship:

*As for the enclosed pages, do with them what you will.* He [Adam] had given me his permission, and I don't feel that turning his encrypted, Morse-code jottings into full sentences constitutes a betrayal of any kind. Despite my editorial involvement with the text, in the deepest, truest sense of what it means to tell a story, every word of *Fall* was written by Walker himself. (166)

What Jim is trying to say is that he is not the author of Adam Walker's story. Editing and rearranging his friend's manuscript does not constitute authoring the text. One can easily see how different this is from Auster's previous writer-characters, who believe that they "own" other people's life stories: the I-narrator in *The Locked Room* acquires and publishes Fanshawe's manuscripts, and even tries to write Fanshawe's biography; in *Leviathan*, Aaron submits his writings on Sachs to the police as proof that he knows his friend. Nevertheless, in *Invisible*, Jim says that he is not the author—Adam is. In one sense, Jim can say he is not the author because earlier characters, like Mr. Blank and August Brill, failed to both be and not be authors, trying but failing to completely control and manipulate their characters and their own lives as authors. For Jim, on the other hand, writing is a way of resurrecting his friend. When he learns that Adam is dead before their reunion, he studies Adam's letter and manuscript as if the dead Adam were talking to him: "I felt that as long as I held the letter in my hand, . . . it would be as if he had been resurrected, as if he had been momentarily brought back to life in the words he had written to me" (165). Thus, for Jim, putting together Adam's writings meant reconstructing Adam's life, which he could never again encounter in reality. Transferring one's writings to another person is a recurring motif in Auster's novels (examples include Quinn's red notebook, Black's manuscript, Fanshawe's notebooks, Peter Aaron's manuscripts, Trause's young writings, and Graf's report). Such transferred writings are destined to be missed, misunderstood, and sometimes modified beyond the original writer's intention. The text transferred from Adam to Jim, however, focuses on another outcome: *sharing* Adam's recollection. They are not cancelled, discarded, or destroyed by the recipient but affirmed, even though part of the story remains a mystery.

This novel, then, seems to focus on what happened to Adam as a character in his own story, rather than on a narrative involving the recipient, Jim, so much so that the most significant relationship in the novel is between Adam and Rudolf

Born, not Adam and Jim. The unreachable other for Jim is Adam; for Adam, it is Born. Adam's pursuit of Born is certainly the most hopeless, and thus the most Austerian, journey in search of the unreachable other, and the act of writing is always present in their relationship as well. Rudolf Born was a visiting professor at Columbia University School of International Affairs when Adam was an undergraduate English major at the same university. In their first encounter, at a party, Born attracts Adam's interest by saying, "One day, you'll wind up writing my biography" (12), which the young want-to-be poet cannot resist. In addition, this mysterious other offers Adam a project: to publish a literary magazine and be its Editor in Chief. In this way, Rudolf Born tactically entraps Adam into the place of an author (the author of the biography; the author of the magazine). However, this unbelievable advantage soon vanishes when Adam realizes the extent to which Born is unreachable, and completely beyond Adam's understanding. Born's killing of a black boy one night is totally incomprehensible to Adam, because it is the most immoral thing he has ever encountered in his life. Because of this crime, Adam's young self is severely damaged; he cannot escape Born's harm until he is forcedly deported from France for the concocted crime of possessing illegal drugs. The deportation overturns Adam's green-horn plot against Born: to reveal the murder and warn Born's new wife-to-be that he is a murderer. Thus Born remains the ultimate unreachable other for the rest of Adam's life. The existence of this perfect unreachable other forces Adam to write about these events forty years later. Namely, by writing, he attempts to understand both himself and Born, the unreachable other, and to capture his young self in relation to the unreachable other.

Because he has this motivation for writing, the question of what he calls himself in the manuscript becomes important. When Adam confesses in a letter to Jim that he is stuck on his second chapter, Jim advises him, drawing on his own experience as a professional writer, to switch the personal pronoun he uses to designate himself:

By writing about myself in the first person, I had smothered myself and made myself *invisible*, had made it impossible for me to find the thing I was looking for. I needed to separate myself from myself, to step back and carve out some space between myself and my subject (which was myself), and there-

fore I returned to the beginning of Part Two and began writing it in the third person. I became He, and the distance created by that small shift allowed me to finish the book. Perhaps he (Walker) was suffering from the same problem, I suggested. Perhaps he was too close to his subject. (89; emphasis added)

This passage clearly urges the reader to remember Auster's earlier book, *The Invention of Solitude*, which consists of two parts: Part One is written in the first person and Part Two in the third person. Auster even mentions this change in his interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory (*Collected Prose* 562; where Rimbaud's dictum, "Je est un autre," is mentioned). Jim is obviously the mirror-image of Auster himself. The chain of resemblance among the writer-characters shows that, here too, the mirroring, reality-oriented metafiction reflects Auster's own struggle with himself as a character. The solution, to change the distance between the writer-self and the written-self by switching the personal pronoun, here makes visible what was invisible, thus causing the written-self to be distinguished as an "other." Again, we see an Austerian interpretation of the dictum "Je est un autre": the process of writing necessarily accompanies the perspective that sees oneself as an "other." Added to this, in *Invisible* Jim uses his experience as a bridge to reach Adam, the unreachable other. His modest interruptions and editing changes are not an attempt to erase his friend's writing or existence completely, as the suicidal author-characters in Auster's previous two novels did, but to clarify his role as an outsider-narrator of another person's story. Jim expects Adam to adopt this position in his own narrating, and Adam actually does change the personal pronouns into "you" in the second part and then into "he" in the third, successfully working through his writer's block, as Jim did. This metafictional connection through writerly advice illustrates, in comparison with *Oracle Night*, a change in the attitude of outside writer-character's (Sidney and Jim) toward the complexity of the writer's work.

Moreover, the fact that Adam is no longer alive to tell the truth after thirty years introduces the need for another writer, who can fill the gap by telling what happened to Born after Adam left the scene. Cécile Juin plays this role. She was Adam's acquaintance during his time in Paris, and she also knows Born well, because he was the man likely to become her second father. Jim goes to Paris to see



her after Adam's death, and she hands over to Jim photocopied pages of her diary, in which she has recorded her own final experiences in pursuit of Rudolf Born. Jim tells the reader that he has translated Cécile's words from French into English "with the author's full permission" (274). He completely retreats from the surface of the narration after this moment, announcing, "I have nothing more to say. Cécile Juin is the last person from Walker's story who is still alive, and because she is the last, it seems fitting that she should have the last word" (274). Jim does not return to the story to retrieve her writing; instead, he lets it finish with her words. Thus, this novel begins with the other's (Adam's) writing and ends with the other's (Cécile's) writing, even though Jim is always behind the scenes, editing and translating their stories.

The photocopied pages from Cécile's diary are about Rudolf Born and her experiences when she reconnected with him after her mother's death. Throughout the whole story, Born functions as the final enigma that no one can solve, whose real personality no one can reach, exactly as he was for Adam. He is a perfect example of the unreachable other. Cécile, who liked Adam very much, plays the role of a pursuer. Her diary describes the process by which she eventually finds it impossible to explain Born's intentions. The unreachability that Cécile finds in Born is a repetition of the unreachability that Jim finds in Adam.

At the end of Cécile's story, and thus at the end of the entire novel, the impossibility of comprehending the unreachable other is likened to the sound of natives working in the stone quarry in the Caribbean Island where Born has his estate. After a definitively unfruitful argument, she decides to leave that place as soon as possible, and encounters the "music":

The music of the stone was ornate and impossible, a music of fifty or sixty clinking hammers, each one moving at its own speed, each one locked in its own cadence, and together they formed a fractions, stately harmony, a sound that worked itself into my body and stayed there long after I had left, and even now, sitting on the plane as it flies across the ocean, I can still hear the clinking of those hammers in my head. That sound will always be with me. For the rest of my life, no matter where I am, no matter what I am doing, it will always be with me. (307-08)

The music of the stone suggests the powerful existence of the unreachable other. Cécile accepts this as something within her that is impossible to understand, something unreachable even though it is within her, by transforming it into words in her diary. Her words might make Jim, who receives them, also accept this mysterious other.

None of the writer-characters, Adam, Cécile, or Jim, tries to create a de-nouement using the life stories of their unreachable others. This attitude is very different from that of Auster's other writer-characters: by experiencing double "suicides" in *Travels in the Scriptorium* and *Man in the Dark*, the authorial figure reaches a certain place in the "afterlife." There the "meta" construction of the story-within-a-story becomes a device, not for controlling and taking advantage of the unreachable other, but for reaching as far as possible toward that being. This attitude of being *with* the other seems a way of reaching the unreachable other.

## Conclusion

The writer-characters in Auster's later novels undergo a continuous process of negotiation between the authorial power that controls their characters and the suicidal desire to nullify their writings. *Oracle Night* reveals the author Sidney drawing deliberate parallels between himself and his fictional world, although he is only able to reach a dead end and erase it by exercising his authority. *Travels in the Scriptorium* and *Man in the Dark* present two opposing ways that authors discard and regain authority, not only by manipulating the characters in their heads, but also by being manipulated by other forces beyond their control. In *Invisible*, however, the role of the writer transforms from the judge who delivers a death sentence, to the person who receives what the unreachable other sends.

After *Invisible*, Auster wrote another novel called *Sunset Park*, which completely lacks this mirroring, struggling authorial figure who narrates the entire story. Although the characters involve themselves in some representation projects, they are not fiction writers (the projects include Miles Heller's photographs of abandoned things, Alice Bergstrom's dissertation on films, Ellen Brice's sketch of human bodies). These loosely connected individuals are not tied into the writer-and-written-character relationship. Rather, this entire novel is, in a sense, an ensemble pageant: four troubled young people are living together in the con-

temporary desolated but hopeful town of Brooklyn, far from questions about an author's victory or defeat. In this enterprise, the author is not dead but hidden behind the characters and scenes. Except for a brief mention of real-life writers such as Liu Xiaobo, the only fiction-writing characters in *Sunset Park*, Renzo Michaelson and Martin Ruthstein, stay far from the other characters, having no metafictional power to directly manipulate the other characters, and unknowingly play background roles behind the main characters (for instance, Miles's father, Morris, is the editor and publisher of their novels, Miles is reading Renzo's novel). This is where Auster has arrived, after his half-self-mutilating and half-power-oriented struggle with writing. Every character carries his or her problems, which are unreachable by the others; however, a community is established and it somehow works. Auster finally reaches a place where he can embrace the unreachable others in his story world, which he once failed to control completely. Only by including the unreachability of the other within "me," can he, for the first time, write to "you," the unreachable other.

Anna, the heroine of *In the Country of Last Things*, writes the whole story as a letter to "you," the other self she has imagined as its recipient. This projection of the writer's self onto an unreachable addressee seems to be a closed loop—endlessly turning within oneself. After examining the relationships between the writer-characters and their unreachable others, however, it is noticeable that this "you," the unreachable other, contains innumerable imaginative possibilities. For example, it certainly includes the readers who actually have the published book in their hands. With this orientation toward the reader who is the ultimate unreachable other, Anna's "I am writing to you" becomes the essential and everlasting theme of Auster's fiction writing. The writer-characters in Auster's twenty-first century novels—Sidney Orr, Mr. Blank, August Brill, and Jim Freeman—are products of the author's never-ending process of writing toward the unreachable "you," which contains—away from the loop—you, the reader.

#### [Notes]

- 1) "Je est un autre" is a phrase that Arthur Rimbaud uses twice in his letters, once to Georges Izambard on May 13, 1871 (*Letters* 56) and again to Paul Demeny on May 15, 1871 (*Letters* 60; this time he writes it as "JE est un autre"). Rimbaud coined this dictum to express the alterity that his genius could turn himself into.

Auster cites this at least three times: in *The Invention of Solitude* (133); in the interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory (*Collected Prose* 562); and also in an interview with Joseph Mallia (*BOMB* 26), each time modifying its original meaning to reflect his own: that one cannot fully understand oneself.

- 2) In the interview with Jill Owens, Auster told her that "it [the picture of an old man sitting on the edge of the bed] was me, as an old man, twenty years from now."
- 3) In Auster's *Oracle Night*, the uncompleted story is 'Empire of Bones' (143-44), the manuscript that young Trause once wrote. Bringing up this story again seems to be Auster's way of reworking the old, uncompleted work. And of course, "Trause" is an anagram of "Auster."

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## SUMMARY

## Writing to “You”:

## The Author’s Self and the Unreachable Other in Paul Auster’s Later Novels

Hikari HAYASHI

Paul Auster’s novels are filled with characters who write. His first story collection, *The New York Trilogy*, addresses the problem of how to produce an image of the other and its relation to the act of writing. Repeated appearances by writer-characters in Auster’s later (twenty-first century) novels, however, present the metafictional approach toward the writer and the act of writing differently: the quality of *unreachability* between the writer and his written characters becomes more significant. The unreachability in Auster’s later works is caused by the simple process of writing and being written about. This paper aims to examine the representation of unreachable others in the narrative device of metafiction, which characterizes Auster’s later works. *Oracle Night* (2003), *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006), *Man in the Dark* (2008), and *Invisible* (2009) provide us with profound opportunities to consider this unreachability between a writer and his characters in different ways. In these novels, Auster and his writer-characters engage in a continuous process of negotiation between the author’s power to control characters and his suicidal desire to nullify his own writing. *Oracle Night* reveals the author Sidney creating a deliberate parallel between himself and his fictional world, only to reach a dead end and erase it by exercising his authority. *Travels in the Scriptorium* and *Man in the Dark* show two opposing ways that authors can discard and regain authority, not only by manipulating the characters in their heads, but also by being manipulated by other forces beyond their control. In *Invisible*, however, the role of the writer is transformed from that of a judge who delivers a death sentence, to that of a person receiving what is sent by the unreachable other. Thus, one can speculate that the ultimate unreachable other is the reader who actually holds a published book in his or her hand. The essential and everlasting theme of Auster’s fiction writing therefore becomes “I am writing to you,” meaning you, the reader.