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# Subjective Hesitation in Paul Auster's *Report from the Interior*: 'you think of yourself as anyone, as everyone'

Nicolas Pierre BOILEAU

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- 1 Paul Auster's 2013 memoir *Report from the Interior* is yet another example of the author's sustained efforts at writing (about) his own life. Well versed in the art of autobiography since *The Invention of Solitude* in 1982, Paul Auster takes some of us by surprise in this fifth autobiographical volume by offering a text that seemingly borrows more from the patriarchal tradition of linear, logical narratives often attributed to the example set by Rousseau—at least for the first part—than from the postmodern explorations of fragmentation, recycling and intertextual playfulness that has made his name (Smith and Watson). The memoir presents itself as an exercise in style in which young Paul is interpreted in context: the general *Zeitgeist* at the time of his birth, his Jewish background and identity, and his artistic and cultural developments are given a central function, as if to reduce the singularity of Auster's trajectory before teenagehood, and to make it fit a bigger picture of American genealogy. More importantly, this text is presented as the follow-up to a previous memoir that sought to interrogate the body (the 2012 *Winter Journal*), beckoning the reader to consider *Report from the Interior* as only one part of a wider narrative, and the autobiographical text as an ongoing process<sup>1</sup>. Despite its fragmented structure, the memoir fits into a well-known, established tradition of memoir writing. *Report from the Interior* is divided into four parts: the first section tells the story of Auster's earliest years, until the age of 12; the second is based on the reviews of two films that Auster regard as essential to his development; the third part is made of letters exchanged with the woman who was going to become his first wife and of a self-commentary on these letters and juvenilia; the fourth part is made of pictures and captions, but these documents can hardly be described as personal ones. In autobiographies, editors and authors often provide the readers with pictures that have been undisclosed before the publication of the memoir,

especially in commercial memoirs; here instead, we are presented with public and press photographs of the events and cultural objects referred to in the previous three parts. The hybridity of the autobiographical text is far from uncommon. If one may be surprised to see a whole section of pictures in Auster's 2013 memoir, as opposed to pictures inserted in the text, both strategies seem to exist in published texts<sup>2</sup>.

- 2 All things considered, this memoir has aroused but little critical interest or acclaim, especially in comparison with other autobiographical texts published by the author: Auster's latest two memoirs were published almost at the same time, to somewhat negative reviews to boot<sup>3</sup>, and the critical response seems to suggest that the texts failed to meet the expectations of the public. As far as *Report from the Interior* is concerned, some reviewers have noted the lack of apparent connection between the sections of the text, and the lack of cohesion of the whole: 'Even by the standards of the distinctive literary stylist and his formal ingenuity, this is an unusual book... Auster has divided the book into four distinct and very different parts.'<sup>4</sup> It is true that for those interested in the fragmentation and playful appropriation of past experiences, of various cultural codes of representation, or to put it more simply, in this post-structuralist age, this memoir's apparent absence of doubt, uncertainty, and its reliance on commonly-accepted truths and knowledge is unusual (Ciocia). In other words, Auster's memoir seems to be an example of what memoirs have long been said to be: it is the reconstruction of a life told by the person that lived this life. There is but one, conspicuous formal feature that attracts the attention straightaway: the text is written in the second person, 'you'. As early as in the 1970s, Lejeune had envisaged this as a possibility after the fashion of Georges Perec and Michel Butor's fictional works, even if Lejeune was not able to cite a text that was written like this at the time (Lejeune, 1975, 17). According to Benveniste, who comments on the second person 'tu' in French, 'you/ tu' is the non-subjective person. 'You/ Tu' can thus be either the indeterminate speaker or a "fictive" voice (Benveniste 232). This interpretation is reinforced in translation, because 'you' may be used both for the singular and the collective. Other contemporary autobiographers have played with grammar to evoke the subjective distance between the text and the self, between the narrated I and the narrating I, such as Coetzee's use of 'he' for himself in *Scenes from a Provincial Life* (which Auster also practices in the second part of *The Invention of Solitude*, "The Book of Memory"), but it is true that 'you' is more often used as a form of address to the reader in a genre that has been described as profoundly dialogic (Jacomard), and is only occasionally used throughout a text (Gasparini 173-84). The use of 'you', suggesting a form of distance between the author and the person they describe, is the first, blatant sign of an exploration of subjective division that this paper will interrogate. Subjective division is at the heart of the autobiographical project, as many theorists have pointed out, since it is a text that stages the distance between the narrating and the narrated I (Gilmore; Lejeune). It can be argued that this division places the subject in the position of the addressee, forcing the self to be observed and addressed, showing that the self is spoken perhaps more essentially than it speaks. This may be the sign of another division, one that is less central in Auster's autobiographical discourse and that this paper seeks to explore from a psychoanalytic perspective. Psychoanalytical readings of Auster's work have been multifarious: my approach will not be about reconstructing the 'case' of Paul Auster, but of trying to identify what, in the discourse he attempts to have about himself, is redolent of the unconscious that speaks or by which the author himself is spoken.

- 3 The choice of the grammatical person is aligned with the very title of the memoir: *Report from the Interior* suggests that there exists something that can be reported upon, separated from the rest of the writer's being. The title also infers that the writing self is going to render a thorough description of a reality they have been witness to and which is situated at a safe distance from their present state. This reading is sustained by Paul Auster's presenting himself as a realist, despite many critics' hailing him as a postmodernist (Auster 1997, 297). In *In the Country of Last Things* and *Travels in the Scriptorium*, Auster already toys with the idea of a report by having characters read or being the recipient of reports written by others or themselves, as traces of a past that is now bygone and impossible to retrieve. The preceding presentation in itself should be enough to invalidate any psychoanalytical reading of the memoir, especially from a Lacanian point of view, since Lacan's unconscious is precisely that which cannot be reported upon and which can only manifest in signs that must be interpreted. However, Lacan also pointed out that the function of the analysis is that of a secretary or amanuensis of the patient. I shall argue that Auster's self-confessed notion of division corresponds to the currently predominant cognitive discourse that situates all human activity within the brain and furthers the emphasis laid in American psychology on the self and the specularly of existence. His memoir, on the contrary, challenges this vision. The title of Auster's memoir elicits the impression of the definition of the self as divided between an exterior, associated with semblance, attitude, behaviour and surface, and an interior that needs to be delved into, deconstructed, dissected, and possibly retrieved. The 'interior' does not seem to be the subjective, epiphanic moments of awareness explored in Modernist aesthetics, or a Proustian opposition between social and private selves, but the ultra-referential reality that should be ever so common and yet fails to be captured by the subject's use of language: pictures, dates, news, popular culture and books are repeatedly quoted as milestones that cannot totally encapsulate the sense of real that is thus portrayed as unstable. The word 'report' furthermore evokes the vocabulary of journalism and its ideal code of objectivity, where 'you' is used as a mode of access to empathy, as a way of including the audience, in other words as a mode of address that is imagined rather than real. It is this very prejudice, in its relation to the pregnancy of ego-psychology in the United States, that I wish to address from the point of view of Lacanian psychoanalysis. I will try to show how the autobiographical project fails, in the sense that it is only successful where the author's plan does not quite materialise and when the signs of the real, however fleetingly, appear. Setting out to portray a young man of his generation, Auster conveys the accidents of Paul in the trajectory of a life that is best described as an example of what is *not* common in the experience of an(y) American, Jewish boyhood. The relentless logic that is applied to a life that is regarded as meaningful, perhaps a way of explaining why Paul grew fond of Sherlock Holmes (*Report* 28), is the sign of an anxiety towards the random, the accidental, that Auster shows in the same act of wanting to erase it, through a carefully-crafted programme. I will show how the use of 'you', of letters, real texts and pictures, are ways of trying to substantiate a reality that only exists in the narrative. In order to do so, the emphasis will be laid on the fact that the report is rapidly replaced by explorations of a symbolic nature. The author's portrayal of a contextual reality, before he starts looking at the narrative reconstruction of his life should not make the readers overlook the inevitable fractures that threaten to make the author fledge in his position of authority. The author shows his subjective vulnerability and the threat of his absence in these strategies.

## 1. Memory as a reservoir

- 4 Like a reporter, Auster's strategy of remembrance is based on description and taxonomy, iteration and chronicling, as if truth was lodged in details as yet not interpreted. In order to find the logic behind the events of his life and to retrieve the 'interior' of his self, perhaps in an attempt to find a place to position that self, Auster's text is replete with lists of events, cultural items, words and books, all of which delineates an experience that *only* needs retrieving, if one accepts Auster's presentation of it. The strategy also gives the feeling that the life narrated is the life of Everyman. The first example seems to be programmatic: wanting to historicise who he was, Auster draws a list of his 'circumstances' including social, cultural, geographical and ethnic characteristics that enable readers to situate him. These elements are reduced to the most basic expression ("mother and father; bicycle, tricycle," *Report 6*) because they serve the function of representing something that has no individuality, or where the subject is absent: "a little world inside the big world, which was the entire world for you back then, since the big world was not yet visible" (*Report 6-7*). This seems to elicit a logic by which anything micro- fits into a *macrocosm*, a logic that is inherent to the vision of a self divided between an exterior and an interior that can be assembled.
- 5 Auster's approach to the individual past is presented as a method from the very first pages, as if it unfailingly would offer the best way of recuperating the past: "Your earliest thoughts, remnants of how you lived inside yourself as a small boy... Bits and pieces" (*Report 4*). Behind this logic lie two trends: on the one hand, Auster seems to have decided that before 12, children are not individualised yet; People's experiences, although dependent on the context and family into which they were born, are likely to have the same logic and are subjected to a similar development, reflected in the very numerous link words and the phraseology of a demonstration the author uses in order to describe *his* circumstances. On the other hand, there is a radical disconnection between the person then and the person now, as has been analysed by many autobiography critics. This disconnection strengthens the division noted from the beginning, and the acknowledgement of the presence of an other within, a line of fracture, demands that the author should reflect upon a logic now foreign to himself:
- It was one thing to write about your body, to catalogue the manifold knocks and pleasures experienced by your physical self, but exploring your mind as you remember it from childhood will no doubt be a more difficult task—perhaps an impossible one... because you think of yourself as anyone, as everyone. (*Report 4*)
- 6 The new autobiographical project is presented as impossible, or at least much more difficult than anything the author has done so far, but the reason for this remains unexplained. The quote delineates a logic in which the body is now opposed to the mind, in the same way that the child is different from the adult: "You have decided not to cross the boundary of twelve" (*Report 5*). Nevertheless, the story of his body, like the story of his interior, is the story of *any-body*.
- 7 What matters then is the attempt to overcome the difficulties of the exercise, as suggested in the use of the imperative: "Dig up the old stories, scratch around for whatever you can find, then hold up the shards to the light and have a look at them. Do that. Try to do that" (*Report 5*). There is material out there and memory is a large storage room awaiting the structure of a narrative. Yet such statement may infer a

conflation of the reader and the author's persona, as the imperative further assimilates the 'you' of the author to the 'you' of the reader which, incidentally, is rarely used in this autobiography. Auster may be inviting us to complement his narrative, aware as he is that his enterprise is easier said than done ('Try to do that', he adds). Other passages in which series of elements are noted in a taxonomical form occur with birds and their language (*Report 10*), celebrities and books that were important (*Report 25*), or the events that happened when Auster was born—a fairly long list being concluded by: "Random, unrelated events, connected only by the fact that they all occurred in the year of your birth, 1947" (*Report 64*). The passage finishes with a confession of the contingency of the events but also a sense that they speak for themselves thanks to the date, an objective element marking the permanence of reality, perhaps for the readers to remember their own childhood and elaborate on the contingent experience thus encountered. Paradoxically, it is by turning out to the external world that Auster intends to look inside. The text's programme is to look outside to some observable and common reality. The 'interior' is not approached as easily as it seems and Auster's initial project for his memoir seems to be an attempt at finding the cause of his inside knowledge outside.

## 2. Memory then, Memory Now, and the Impossible Reconstruction

- 8 However, what seems most interesting is to unveil the interpretative mode of Auster's narrative because it suggests that this list of elements and characteristics does not fully exhaust the meaning they had in *his* life: for him, each detail is construed as significant at a greater scale, falling into place in his life as a whole, because his interior life contains a degree of permanence evoking the early days of his life: "Just one month short of your sixty-fifth birthday, and every morning you drink from a cup designed for children, a Peter Rabbit cup" (*Report 20*). The strategy adopted by Auster consists in drawing lines, cataloguing, structuring and explaining life. It leads to images of a division of subjectivity that is categorised by obsessional criteria: the age of 12; the motto that the same causes produce the same effects; a narrative that unfolds as if there was little doubt as to the processes of the child's mind. In this context, memory is presented as a reservoir whose access is barred from consciousness for various, unexplored reasons: the writer is here to become aware again, to make these past thoughts emerge along the lines of a Freudian tradition of repression (Freud). Interestingly, the author notices that many events are random, contingent, seemingly disconnected from a general pattern, but his ambition is to find "the scaffolding behind the cotton-wool" to use a phrase by Woolf (Woolf 84), and to re-inject meaning by formulating these isolated memories into the grander narrative of his life and the lives of American boys.
- 9 Paul Auster grew up as a typical young boy, or so the narrative seems to suggest, and it is only through gradual acts of passage that he became aware of his separation from the trajectory of everyone else. The commonality of his early years transpires through the recognition of various traits that are social and cultural: his Jewishness, his bookishness, etc; "After embracing the triumphal narrative of American exceptionalism as a little boy, you began to exclude yourself from the story" (*Report 72*). It is interesting to note that the words chosen indicate that subjective positioning is

understood to be an act of volition and willingness, as if the subject was in control of his life. In this account, the unconscious seems very much absent, despite a critical history of reading Auster from a psychoanalytical perspective (Vallas 1996, 88). Classical so-called formations of the unconscious are not interpreted as such, but as pleasant anecdotes denoting the facetious innocence of children: "Until you were five or six, perhaps even seven, you thought the words *human being* were pronounced *human bean*" (Report 11). And yet, one is tempted to object that this memory may resonate with "human *been*," rather than "bean," or in addition to "bean," that is one of the traits of Auster's writing in which the past recurs ceaselessly as that which cannot be written (off).

- 10 The absence of interpretation of the phonetic mistake does not compare to the rest of the text. For the memoir is indeed fraught with attempts at finding a hidden meaning, a structure to think and place the events of Auster's life, even when such structure is declared impossible. Auster seems convinced that there is a logic behind every thought he had, and that logic reigns supreme. Here are a few examples underlined to show the hegemony of this mode of presentation: "*Logic demands that they be large, since the people who appear on television are always larger than their images on-screen*" (Report 8); "*No doubt influenced by the cartoons you loved to watch, you thought there was a pole jutting out from the North Pole. Similar to one of those striped, revolving columns that stood in front of barbershops*" (Report 6); "*You concluded that they dug holes for the pure pleasure of digging, that they were mad for digging and simply couldn't stop themselves*" (Report 11). In the other parts of the text, the presence of pictures of what is described in the narrative, or the diary and letter entries, both quoted directly or reformulated, play the same role of proving, illustrating, providing evidence for the events expressed and their internal structure. They are replaced and reconfigured from an interpretative mode where the contingent is erased.
- 11 In his 2013 memoir, Auster seems to make of his life something unexceptional, as if he was just anyone:
- What had happened to cause such an overpowering feeling? Impossible to know, but you suspect it had something to do with the birth of self-consciousness, *that thing that happens to children at around the age of six...* Our lives enter a new dimension at that point, for that is the moment when we acquire the ability to tell our stories to ourselves, to begin the uninterrupted narrative that continues until the day we die. Until that morning, you just were. (Report 13, emphasis mine)
- 12 The autobiographer is in the know of something that is developmental and equally shared by all: the age at which this upheaval manifests in the life of everyone is posited, and the description of Paul's development suggests something more universal than personal. The trajectory of a life seems to be circumscribed and structured around the "ability to tell our stories to ourselves," but the author does not raise the question of what fails in that account for it to be "uninterrupted" and "continu[e] until the day we die." Life is not worth until it is written, but writing it is impossible—a conundrum most autobiographers must face. The discourse that pre-exists Auster's narrative and the use of the plural point to the fact that the personal is safely kept at bay in this story, or that it is founded in a more collective story.
- 13 Auster plays with the few mishaps and difficulties that contradict the apparent simplicity of the title of his autobiography: "The possibility that there might be a contradiction in all this never once entered your thoughts" (Report 3), he declares in order to reflect upon the freedom of children's psychological processes and the equal

dissatisfaction of the adult author with such unresolved contradiction. The reconstruction of the past is fraught with pitfalls and Auster's text shows hesitation and doubts that are acknowledged as quickly as they are negated. Passages in which a disjunction between the story told and the failure to explain it all logically may be acknowledged at times: "You can't remember the precise moment when you understood that you were a Jew. It seems to you that it came sometime after you were old enough to identify yourself as an American, but you could be wrong, it could be that it was part of you from the beginning" (*Report 67*). Yet, these passages alternate with other affirmations that leave no room for interpretation or doubt: "To be part of that disaster when you were a boy no doubt drove you inward, turning you into a man who has spent the better part of his life sitting alone in a room" (*Report 48*).

- 14 The text starts by emphasising the difficulty of remembering, but an equal number of facts are placed within a logic that defies any contradiction as they form part of the story not just of one American boy of the 50s, but of any American boy then: "At least you think you can remember, you believe you remember, but perhaps you are not remembering at all, or remembering only a later remembrance of what you think you thought in that distant time which is all but lost to you now" (*Report 4*). Remembering or not remembering, knowing or not knowing, the distribution is simple and the line of division equally posited at a reasonable situation in the narrative process: "Back then, in the obscure days of your dawning consciousness, you understood nothing. Life was kind to some and cruel to others, and your heart ached because of it" (*Report 18*). Yet this simplicity runs the risk of leaving events unexplored, because Auster also seeks to account for what relentlessly escapes the logical construction of the imaginary self: "The real is so defiantly at odds with the imagined" (*Report 9*), says Auster in a sentence which a Lacanian would rephrase as 'the real is so defiantly at odds with the imaginary.' In other words, what happens is always accidental and contingent, and it rips off the carefully crafted, logic world of the Imaginary. This often results in a difficulty to make sense of certain events that autobiography is expected to delve into. It is here that a clearer picture of what psychoanalytical theory has to offer may help go beyond this narrative of the logic of life.

### 3. Noticing the unregistered and the uninscribed

- 15 The field of psychoanalysis cannot but appear as monolithic to outsiders and incredibly fractured to insiders: schools, institutions functioning from different approaches, theoretical battles that led to conflicts (Freud vs Breuer; Freud vs Jung) or excommunication (Lacan) and opposed visions of treatment (Freudian, Lacanian, Winnicott, etc) have led the psychoanalytical discourse to collapse in recent years and to be the target of many attacks from more coherent-looking, competing theories (cognitive psychology, neurosciences, etc.). Lacan's return to Freud is historically intermeshed with his rejection of American ego-psychology (King). I shall not enter the theoretical debate, but what can be said is that Hartmann's and Jung's emphases on the ego in treatment lead to reflections on a social sense of self, caught in—if not limited to—questions of norms, meaning, images and ideals, when Lacanian's gradual formulation of the real as a concept seeks to detach the subject from its self/ ego or in French 'moïque' representations, which alienate their sense of being. For Lacan, images, Narcissistic ideals are that which hides, or keeps the unconscious veiled, that is a

dimension which does not allow one to consider the trajectory of the drive and impulses when they meet language, their effects and equivocations (Lacan 2013). In other words, the axis of the self's image (a-a') is the lure of meaning, where things are thought to have a logic that the unconscious jeopardises. Laurent explains this in a paradoxical formula: "For psychoanalysis, *Meaning is misuse*. As soon as meaning is thought to be used, parapaxis, Freudian slips and mistakes emerge" (Laurent 138, my translation).

- 16 Ego-psychology became extremely popular in the USA, especially in the wake of Laing's so-called 'antipsychiatric' school (Szasz 2008) that saw mental disorders as effects of, or responses to, social structures and problems (Hochmann 56-7). This approach values a treatment focused on a strengthening of the ego, through valorisation, compliments, but it also runs the risk of reinforcing the attachment to images of the self, to the sense of a meaning that is possibly destructive for the subjects who are led to believe they are what they look like or are seen to be, what Lacan calls 'semblance' (Lacan 2006). Furthermore, this attachment to meaning may leave the subject unequipped for the contingency of the real events s.he will have to face. Ultimately this vision of the ego makes it stronger than subconscious impulses and drives that remain unseen, unregistered or miscomprehended.
- 17 First of all, ego-psychology is noticeable in Auster's understanding of the division of the self as primarily imaginary, rather than symbolic; as caused by the split between the public and the private, rather than as an effect of the signifier on his very body. What this means is that Auster does not lay the stress on the signs of a division caused by language and prefers to focus on the more traditional divisions resulting from time passing and the memory process. According to Lacan, the reliance on signifiers in language makes any access to the real impossible, because the real cannot be referred to in symbol, or touched. In *Report from the Interior*, Auster is interested in a form of division that is imaginary, one that occurs between a self secretly and (comfortably) kept at bay, and a self that is manipulated by or under the gaze of others: the time of adolescence is thus understood as a time of "wondering and often fretting about how others perceive you, which necessarily makes it a time of much tumult and silliness, when the rift between one's inner self and the self one presents to the world is never wider" (*Report* 90). Words of logic abound in this simple proposal while the way a 'self' is presented to the world remains unsaid. It seems to be a willing act of displaying a self that is mono-faceted to a world that is unanimous and anonymous. One cannot fail to notice that the body has carefully been separated from the 'interior' into two different texts, so much so that the writer is still wondering about some enigmas that are linked to his conceptualisation of self and being as synonymous terms:

Every now and then, however, in fact only twice that you can recollect with any precision, a perverse impulse would take hold of you, an urge to destroy and mutilate, to sabotage, to smash things to bits, and you would turn around and do something fundamentally out of character, at odds with the self you had come to recognize as your own. (*Report* 53)

- 18 The self is experienced as ill-fitting, or at least as inoperative to account for the greater sense of being that the self would seem to limit. The "impulse" that is "perverse" and which resonates as profoundly anti-social, is a sign of something beyond the self that acts for itself, where the subject is not. There is a sense of being that goes beyond the self, and this surfeit is enigmatic: this is why it is worthwhile to analyse, to write about, in an attempt to gain control over this other scene—the scene of the unconscious.

Another form of division, what in Lacanian terminology could be called a symbolic castration, is equally noticed by Auster (Lacan 1998, 143-354). A similar lack of recognition to the one quoted above occurs when Auster reads the letters he sent to the woman who was going to become his first wife: "As you listen to him speak on the page, you scarcely recognize him anymore" (*Report* 182). This form of misappropriation of the self is less fully explored than the autobiographer's attachment to the context as superseding the subjective choice, perhaps because it can easily be taken for a simple distance between the self of the past and the self of the present, as if there were an inherent break in one's life that autobiographers would explore.

- 19 However, this division may also be understood at a more psychoanalytical level as the realisation of the subject's partial appropriation of the self: "That was the place you returned to, that epicentre of potential nervous breakdowns, and whatever private struggles you might have been going through that year, they cannot be separated from the general sense of doom that hovered in the air around you..." (*Report* 226). The author finds himself in sync with a "general sense of doom" that justifies more than it explains the feelings that were his. This approach can be said to fail as the constant rewriting of these scenes and experiences through various texts would tend to suggest that none satisfyingly enabled the writer to solve the enigma. Yet, the writing of this also can be interpreted as an attempt at dealing with a more essential distance that the autobiographical genre alone cannot entirely account for. This is the sign of another division that is as blatant as the one between an interior and an exterior: as Lacan says, the real never stops failing to be written (Lacan 1975, 132). This typically accounts for the reason why for *parlêtre*, i.e. speaking beings, language fails to encapsulate what one means and narratives are re-told constantly, recontextualised and re-negotiated; the author never quite manages to come to a satisfying account, or at least not one that holds for ever: 'You have already written about some of the things that happened to you over the course of the next few months (in *Hand to Mouth*), describing your quarrel with the Columbia administrator in Paris.' (*Report* 199) Failing to see in this a valid symptom of another division, a division caused by language, Auster remains attached to a vision of 'circumstances' that cover up his own experience. It is as if these circumstances dissimulated the exposure of his own *jouissance* at the enigmatic failure of the subject's appropriation of the self:

The tone of your letters begins to change after that. The morose, self-absorbed malcontent of the past few months suddenly vanishes, and in his place another, altogether different person starts writing to London. A mysterious transformation, for the outward circumstances of your life were unaltered. (*Report* 243)

- 20 Even when the signs or signification of a radical change surface, Auster is tempted to envisage only the outward reality, rather than the real experience of division—that is the one that escapes linguistic articulation. And yet, numerous examples in the text prove that the contextual, meaningful explanation of the narrative does not exhaust the analysis of his life, especially when he notices the crumbling down of the so-to-speak phallic power of his earlier constructions:

Once you were old enough to compare your situation to that of the other children you knew, you understood that your family was a broken family, that your parents had no idea what they were doing, that the fortress most couples try to build for their children was no more than a tumbledown shack, and therefore you felt exposed to the elements, unprotected, vulnerable... (*Report* 46)

- 21 This moment must be analysed at length because Auster confesses to an experience of a-symbolisation that he names: “daze”. The first thing to note is that he speaks of a moment that opens up an abyss in his logical construction and his memorising. The reason why we may speak of an abyss is that the experience happened “for no apparent reason” and is linked to the loss of a sense of self, “you would suddenly lose track of who you were” (*Report* 44). The subject has disappeared, something happened that was not his, that could not be appropriated and it seems that there is a split in his experience that forces him to externalise the ‘I’, to address the ‘I’ and analyse it. The experience is one of ec-stasy, a “moment of being” in Woolf’s words, where the body is experienced as detached from the sense of being, what Auster struggles to name through comparisons (“as if”), reformulations (“or more precisely,” “not sure”) and the vocabulary of psychiatry (“dissociation”). Nevertheless, it is through the poetic use of language, the creative use of a metaphor that he manages to convey the feeling of “an experience in which ‘your selfhood dribble out of you,’” thanks to the saying “*I’m in a daze*”. Interestingly, these moments of absence to oneself are interpreted as moments of non-being, moments of ontological disappearance: “as if the being who inhabited your body had turned into no one at all” (*Report* 44); “floating outside yourself, a phantom without weight or substance, an uninhabited shell of flesh and bone, a nonperson” (*Report* 45). And yet, one could say that they may be the very engine at the source of Auster’s writing, moments of absence that the author tries to render so as to make them his own. This experience of dissociation could be signs of the real, that which Lacan defines as the impossible to name and the impossible to imagine, but whose reality is impossible to escape. Whatever it be the sign of, it is manifest in Auster’s choice of the ‘you’, which literally makes the subject (‘I’) disappear and replaces it with the addressee of the text: his autobiography in this sense could be an attempt at saying something about the experience of the subject disappearing, saying it to someone else, who may be himself. It is important to note that Auster used a similar linguistic device in his novel *Invisible* in 2009. The first-person narrative shifts to a second-person narrative when the narrator decides to *write* his story in a chapter about a scene of sexual awakening he experienced with his older sister, that they referred to as the “grand experiment” (Auster 2009, 130). Funnily enough, it is not this shift that is commented upon by the narrator in the novel, but another instance of changing the pronoun. The narrator, writing to an editor he knows, explains that he could not find a way of writing about the event that was told in the first section of the book, where he was a witness to a crime:

Part One was written in the first person, and when I began Part Two (which was more directly about myself than the previous part), I continued writing in the first person, grew more and more dissatisfied with the results, and eventually stopped; The pause lasted several months (difficult months, anguished months), and then one night the solution came to me. My approach had been wrong, I realized. 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 therefore I returned to the beginning of Part Two and began writing it in the third person. (*Invisible*, 89)

- 22 This space between the self and the subject is exactly what *Report from the Interior* creates in order to make the subject visible, so visible in fact that it becomes the place where the autobiographical account is not thorough, because by making the subject so visible, the text precludes the subject’s vulnerability. Lacan’s second definition of the

subject is that it is a subject of the unconscious whose division can only happen in an eclipse.<sup>5</sup>

- 23 The daunting aspect of this subjective experience may account for Auster's clinging to outside circumstances in order to confirm his existence and to find a reason for these experiences of subjective disappearance, for which writing, given the place it grants the subject, may have been a cure. Seen in this light, his attachment to real-life objects and tokens may operate as however many props to confirm that he existed, despite the absence of any such pre-written tale about him:

You thought you had left no traces... For a person born in the mid-twentieth century, the era of the inexpensive camera, the postwar boom days when every middle-class American family was gripped by shutter-bug fever, your life is the least documented of anyone you have ever known. (*Report* 177)

- 24 The book comes out straight after Auster discovers that traces exist indeed, that his body is written or should be written, as it is marked by the weight of language. His text is thus interwoven with the previous texts he re-discovers like previous pictures unbeknownst to him.

## Conclusion

- 25 What is the origin of this absence to himself, this dissociation which the choice of the pronoun 'you' seems to materialise? As Auster comments when reviewing one of the films that mark the second part of his memoir: "The secret is out, impossible to comprehend. But the secret is out" (*Report* 164). The solution to this disconnection may be in the figure or role of the author that he assigned himself but this is not addressed directly, rather than the more problematic issue of comprehension: saying it, telling it, even without understanding, is already a step towards unveiling the enigma of existence, a secret that lies in the random encounter between a being and his/ her drives:

... as if every boy at some point in his childhood were destined to cut down a tree for the pure pleasure of cutting down a tree, but then, of course, George Washington was the father of his country, of your country, and therefore he stood tall and confessed his misdeed to his own father. (*Report* 56)

- 26 George Washington is thus like 'everybody, anybody' but not quite, a secret that applies to Paul Auster after reading this latest autobiographical text, which is a testament to the real presence of that which may be fictional: "You are convinced they are real, that these raggedly drawn black-and-white figures are no less alive than you are" (*Report* 7). In this quote, Auster uses the term "real" for something that is fictional but cannot be escaped; he becomes a *realist* in the Lacanian sense of writing about that which psychically cannot be averted; in other words, that which imposes upon the subject.
- 27 Paul Auster's 2013 memoir is an exercise in style: "Your purpose is to chart the workings of your young mind, to look at yourself in isolation and explore the internal geography of your boyhood" (*Report* 45). The internal geography of boyhood suggests that the author wants to map out the origins of his self in order to order and structure it. What is the relation between this and the Unconscious? The unconscious is not just a reservoir of past events that have been barred, that have been repressed, and that could resurface—which was the Freudian understanding and conceptualisation of the subconscious. The unconscious is the persistence of something not symbolised and not

imagined, by which the subject is spoken, acted, and which at times creates an experience of subjective absence. Hence the fact that Auster's memoir is a project rather than an assured realisation. This conception of the unconscious therefore defies attempts to 'chart' it, as some *terra incognita* that could be colonised and civilised. It forces the subject to always be on the watch-out for the contingent encounter with or against things that agitate them in spite of themselves and to always "look elsewhere" (Lacan 1998 25), as one is forced to when an ideal crumbles, just as Auster has attempted to do with his many autobiographical projects: "If your father wasn't a hero to you, couldn't be a hero to you, that didn't mean you gave up searching for heroes elsewhere" (Report 36).

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## NOTES

1. S. Vallas mentions this feature of Auster's autobiographical writing: "les textes antérieurs débordent le texte que le lecteur découvre sous le titre de 'Book of Memory'" (Vallas 76); See also Lejeune's notion of an "autobiographical space" (Lejeune, 1975, 165-196).
2. Janet Frame's *Autobiography* contains many private pictures that reinforce the referential pact; Roland Barthes, in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, constructs his text by commenting on the personal pictures he uses; the editions of Sylvia Plath's works always use a picture of the author, and in her journals, there is a section with private pictures meant to reinforce the autobiographical work.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/15/winter-journal-paul-auster-review>
4. "Report from the Interior", *Kirkus Reviews*, 05/2013; Gleeson, Sinead. "Paul Auster: a *miscellany* of the mind". *Irish Times*. 05.04.2014. Emphasis mine.
5. I am grateful to Fanny Chevalier (<https://lpcpp.wordpress.com/enseignants/fanny-chevalier/>) for suggesting that I liken both texts.

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## ABSTRACTS

*Report from the Interior*, Auster's 2013 memoir opens with the earliest memories of young Paul up to the age of 12 before the author looks at tokens of his past in three subsequent sections: films, letters and diary entries are reviewed, followed by a final section composed of non-personal photographs. The fragmented structure suggests that the retrospective narrative, which comes, first needs to complement the author's memory. These objects also seem to supplement language where it fails to be referential. Paul Auster's latest memoir surprisingly suggests the pre-existing knowledge of how a child's 'interior' develops and a willingness for his own childhood to fit into a larger picture, turning his own life into a mere example of the development of any American-Jewish boy. But for Lacanian psychoanalysis, what is said matters less than the way what remains unsaid still manages to be conveyed and to influence the subject: a reading in these terms enables one to detach oneself from this carefully crafted example of logical reconstruction of subjectivity, and to observe the stitches of open wounds that fail to be entirely cured. The memoir by Paul Auster hinges around a certain understanding of division that is overwhelmingly present in the construction of the text but which, Auster himself admits, does not explain all the forms of division. Through a Lacanian reading, I will try and show what division remains unexplored—the division caused by language—and how this division can be understood in relation to the use of 'you' instead of 'I' in the text.

*Report from the Interior*, le texte autobiographique que fait paraître Paul Auster en 2013 s'ouvre sur le souvenir des toutes premières années de la vie du jeune Paul, jusqu'à l'âge de ses douze ans, avant que l'auteur n'abandonne le récit rétrospectif au profit de trois autres sections centrées sur des objets de son passé : le récit de films ayant marqué sa vie, puis la relecture et le commentaire de lettres et d'extraits de journal, avant une section finale uniquement composée de photographies non personnelles. Tout se passe comme si les sections du texte qui suivent la reconstruction de ses jeunes années venaient à l'appui d'un récit qui ne suffit pas. Ce qui frappe à la lecture de cette œuvre surprenante dans le canon austérien, c'est qu'elle semble se déployer depuis un savoir pré-existant sur le développement de l'enfant et relève d'une volonté de placer cette histoire individuelle dans un chapitre national qui fait de Paul un jeune Américain juif parmi tant d'autres. Pour la psychanalyse lacanienne, ce beau tableau intéresse moins que la manière dont ce qui ne se dit pas se lit quand même et fait apparaître la trace d'une insécurité subjective. Le récit autobiographique de Paul Auster se déploie sur fond d'une division profondément inscrite dans le texte mais qui, comme le remarque l'auteur lui-même, peine à inscrire toutes les formes de division. À travers une lecture lacanienne de ce texte, je vais chercher à montrer à quelle division, à savoir la division symbolique, l'auteur semble moins s'intéresser, et comment cette division peut être appréhendée pour tenter d'expliquer le choix du « tu » et la disparition du « je ».

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Paul Auster, autobiographie, psychanalyse, Lacan

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