

THE AUSTERIAN MASTER CODE
PAUL AUSTER: TRAVELS IN THE SCRIPTORIUM

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By Eli Park Sorensen

Although one of the big motifs in Paul Auster's oeuvre is the nature of chance, there is a distinct familiarity, even to some extent predictability, about the tone, phrases, choice of settings, techniques, narrative solutions, and characters in all of his novels – a *style* unmistakably 'Austerian', like the unchangeable pattern of a story that is retold over and over again in an infinite number of variants.

In some ways, one may even say that the presence of Auster's style outmanoeuvres the singularity of the actual story itself. Related to this is no doubt the fact that his recent novels seem to balance on the verge of self-plagiarism – a slightly too exaggerated intra-textuality, like for example in the case of *Oracle Night* (2004), a novel which comes pretty close to being an elaborated, yet delightful, self-parody.

Travels in the Scriptorium is no less a book that really only makes sense for devoted Auster-readers, who will be rewarded with a delirious story that draws on the author's entire catalogue of patented motifs. An old man, Mr. Blank, sits alone in (what is possibly) a locked room, uncertain of his identity or his location. Lying on his desk are some photographs, a pen with a notebook, and an unfinished, enigmatic manuscript. While reading the manuscript, the man is constantly interrupted by people who appear uncannily familiar; gradually, we learn that Mr. Blank has been responsible for a number of 'missions' carried out by his 'agents', including Anna Blume, Samuel Farr (from *In the Country of Last Things*), and Quinn (from *The New York Trilogy*) among many others.

In fact, much of *Travels in the Scriptorium* consists of references to previous stories and destinies, strangely rehashed in a way that adds yet another playful dimension to the Chinese boxes of Auster's oeuvre. To the reader familiar with Auster's oeuvre, it is not difficult to fill out the blankness of Mr. Blank's identity; he is the authoritative, dominating Austerian narrator himself, now put on trial by his own characters and their independent stories. The characters become a "we" near the end of the novel, authoritatively passing the sentence on the disorientated and disempowered narrator or author, solemnly declaring that from now on he must live as a fictive character as well.

In this way, the novel is framed by a much larger and more powerful text that includes the reader, albeit only the reader who has been gifted with the Austerian

master code, the knowledge of the entire oeuvre. *Travels in the Scriptorium* is a self-reflexive exploration of the fabric of Auster's style, its spirals and framings of textual borders and transgressions; it is an arrogantly self-congratulating text, jocular rather than pretentious, as well as a charming tribute to the dedicated Auster-reader who will recognise him or herself in the reflexive depths of the author's enigmatic textual bends and creases, unfolding gradually during travels in the scriptorium.

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Ph.D Candidate

Comparative Literature (Department of French)

UCL