Arkadiusz Misztal, ed., *Time, Narrative, and Imagination: Essays on Paul Auster*

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4 This book, a collection of essays on the prose work of Paul Auster, comes as a welcome and timely addition to the growing bibliography of critical works focusing on the writings of the American author. *Time, Narrative, and Imagination: Essays on Paul Auster* offers a kaleidoscopic view of recent Auster scholarship, combining diverse theoretical approaches to specific aspects of Auster’s oeuvre. The central theme of imagination, as it is viewed in relation to the employment of narrative techniques and the articulation of temporality is explored in a generous assortment of twelve essays. The workings of the writer’s imagination in relation to the creative act have been a persistent concern for Auster’s literary endeavors. As editor Arkadiusz Misztal notes in his introduction to the volume, Auster’s work is characterized by the “persistent and determined blurring of the line between the real and the imagined” (11). The volume sets out to bring to light territories of Auster’s “imaginary continent” (11) and explore the “diverse, interrelated, and often overlapping temporalities” (14) that his narratives disclose.

5 Auster is a prolific author who, over the years, has produced a multifaceted and rich oeuvre. The collection manages to cover a great part of the large body of Auster’s prose work, from his first book of memoirs *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) to his 2010 novel *Sunset Park*, providing extensive analyses of key texts that prove to be most revealing in Auster’s manipulation of the tension between reality and imagination. In effect, the reader is offered a bird’s eye view of Auster’s oeuvre as the chapters are arranged so as to roughly follow the chronology of the publication of his works. In addition, the essays are grouped together according to the themes explored, beginning with issues pertaining to
the urban experience, postmodernist metafictional devices, and epistemological experiments and moving on to phenomenological explorations of temporalities associated with trauma and the post-9/11 American milieu.

The first four essays focus on *The New York Trilogy* (1985–1986), Auster’s first work of fiction. Antoine Dechêne’s essay “‘Anywhere out of this World’: Cognition, Perversion and Arbitrariness in Paul Auster’s Metaphysical Detective Stories” opens the collection with a reading of Auster’s *Trilogy* that examines the epistemological and existential aporias faced by the Austerian flâneur who, while participating in the composition of the complex urban text, reaches an inescapable “nowhere of the self” (35). In “Auster’s *Aufzeichnungen*: Paul Auster, Paul Karazik and David Mazzucchelli’s *City of Glass,*” Petra Eckhard also addresses issues of epistemology. She discusses the graphic novel *City of Glass* that was based on the eponymous novella that opens the *Trilogy* and shows how writing becomes a tool for the investigation of the self as thought experiments are conducted on the pages of the protagonist Quinn’s notebook. The transition to the visual language of graphic novels, Eckhard argues, produces new configurations of meaning and knowledge, extending the epistemological questions raised by the novel in its original form. Steven E. Alford’s “Mirrors of Madness: Paul Auster’s *The New York Trilogy,*” originally published in *Critique* in 1995, functions as a link connecting the new studies published here with the older corpus of Auster scholarship. The essay presents a poststructuralist reading of the *Trilogy* that is greatly indebted to Jacques Derrida’s ideas. Alford explores the dispersal of the identity of the author in Auster’s *Trilogy* and illustrates how the borders of such oppositions as criminal/detective and self/other are radically challenged. The self in Auster’s work can only be understood as a textual construct, non-existent outside the slippery realm of language. Jaroslaw Hetman, in “Theoretically Nostalgic: Paul Auster’s *City of Glass,*” reads Auster’s novella through Svetlana Boym’s conception of nostalgia. He discusses Auster’s use of intertextuality, itself inherently nostalgic, and the frequent employment metafictional devices and argues that the author’s nostalgic longing for the literary “phantom homeland” that he creates in his fiction expresses “a longing for the here and now” (113).

Jorgen Veisland’s “The Invisible Artist and the Recovery of Time Lost in Paul Auster’s *Portrait of an Invisible Man, The Book of Illusions* and *Sunset Park*” examines two other later novels and the first part of his first book of memoirs, *The Invention of Solitude.* Beginning with the “incorporeal outline” (an idea drawn from the work of Marcel Proust) of the author’s father in *Portrait of an Invisible Man*, Veisland demonstrates how Auster recreates time lost through a process that involves the becoming visible of the invisible. In *The Book of Illusions* (2002), the process relates to the medium of film and the elusive director Hector Mann, while in *Sunset Park*, the incorporeal outline comes to refer to the haunting image of “the missing buildings” that recall the traumatic memory of 9/11.

The next three essays focus on the major issue of trauma that has marked Auster’s later work. *Man in the Dark* (2008) holds a central position in these discussions. In “Auster’s Narratives of Traumatic Temporality,” François Hugonnier draws from a wide array of sources associated with trauma studies, including texts ranging from Sigmund Freud to Cathy Caruth, and demonstrates how traumatic temporalities, including the Freudian concept of belatedness and the idea of kairos (“event time”), as opposed to chronos (“chronological time”), have shaped Auster’s aesthetics of “the ineffable time of the event” (155). In “Ethical Imagination, Complicity and Trauma in Auster’s *Man in the Dark,*” David Deacon draws on Levinasian ethics so as to address issues of guilt and responsibility.
In Auster’s novel, Ilana Shiloh, in “Travels in a Locked Room: Space and Time in Man in the Dark,” explores the motif of the locked room as one of the major spatio-temporal tropes of Auster’s fiction. She identifies interesting parallels between Man in the Dark and Haruki Murakami’s novel The Wind-up Bird Chronicle, owing to the employment by both authors of the chronotope of the well and she argues that such schemata of containment become sites where the traumatic memory can be reintegrated though the writer’s imagination.

In “From Eccentricity to Human Longing: Paul Auster’s Narrative Conundrums,” Paul Jahshan discusses the recurrent conundrums—virtuoso postmodern literary experiments involving paradoxes, imaginative puzzles, dizzying embeddings, and the masterful weaving together of a variety of motifs and devices—of Auster’s oeuvre from City of Glass to Invisible (2009). He distinguishes between “boys’ literature,” characterized by the author’s desire to impress with postmodern mental gymnastics (a category under which Jahshan also sorts Poe, Borges, and Pynchon) and “grown-ups’ literature,” of a social realist type, concerned with more “serious” issues of identity, suffering, love and community. Jahshan argues that Auster’s fiction is of a twofold quality, as the necessary and pleasurable postmodern eccentricity goes hand in hand with his serious commitment to express human longing.

In “Repetition with a Difference—Paul Auster’s Personal Narratives,” Katarzyna Macedulska discusses Auster’s work as a memoirist in his early book The Invention of Solitude and the more recent “twin texts” Winter Journal (2012) and Report from the Interior (2013). She explores how writing serves as a means to reinvent the self through a play of dis/appearances and focuses on the themes of memory and the lived experience of the senses, what Auster calls in Winter Journal a “phenomenology of breathing.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception, a work to which Auster explicitly refers in his recent autobiographies, offers the theoretical backdrop on which Macedulska examines the concept of the body as a spatio-temporal nexus in its relation to memory and writing in Auster’s memoirs.

The last two essays of the collection draw on Hungarian-born philosopher and social scientist J. T. Fraser’s hierarchical theory of time. The editor of the volume contributes an essay entitled “Time, Body, and Imagination in Paul Auster’s Oracle Night.” Arkadiusz Misztal begins his text by resuming Macedulska’s discussion of the body and the phenomenology of breathing and reads Auster’s 2003 novel so as to show that the understanding of space and time conveyed in Auster’s novel derives from a bodily notion of subjectivity. Subsequently, he turns to Fraser in order to explore the plurality of temporalities that enable imagination to transcend the limits of the body. Rosemary Huisman’s “How Do You Write What Is Not There? How Do You Record What Is Absent? Scraping the Temporal Palimpsest in Auster’s Fiction” extends the previous discussion of Fraser’s temporalities in relation to Auster’s work. Huisman reads two novels from different periods of Auster’s literary career, namely, In the Country of Last Things (1987) and Sunset Park (2010) and argues that postmodern fiction is characterized by the inscription of specific temporalities that are associated with the disruption of identity in an atemporal and chaotic world.

In sum, this book will be an enjoyable read for fans of Auster’s work, academics and scholars alike. It offers informed, thought-provoking, original, and serious scholarship which the general reader may find rather demanding to follow but the effort will certainly prove to be rewarding. It contributes fascinating new perspectives from which Auster’s oeuvre can be read and significantly renews the critical work that has already
been undertaken. Furthermore, as most of the essays build on previous critical work on
the author’s writings, it can also function as a handy introduction and a useful panorama
of Auster criticism to date.