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# An Interview with Paul Auster

New York, March 2014

**Nathalie Cochoy and Sophie Vallas**

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# An Interview with Paul Auster

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Paul Auster: OK, fire away!

Nathalie Cochoy: One of my fields of interest is New York, and the representation of walking in New York. When thinking about the art of walking, I often think of Thoreau and his concept of "sauntering." In "Walking," Thoreau simultaneously associates the French etymology of the word "sauntering" with a loss—*être sans terre*—and a form of pilgrimage—*aller à sainte terre*. You also seem to consider getting lost as a means of finding yourself. In *The Invention of Solitude*, you recall your enjoyment at being lost in the maze of Amsterdam. I also remember these ambivalent lines in one of your poems: "A footstep / gives ground," evoking a form of relinquishment and a form of birth. Is this something you often experience? Is walking a means of returning to the origins of your art?

PA: You've probably read *Winter Journal*, in which I make a confession about my geographic illness. I have difficulty orienting myself in space, and I'm probably one of the few people who gets lost in Manhattan. As I say in the book, I get out of the subway, and I invariably go in the wrong direction, east instead of west, north instead of south... So, for me, the pleasure of walking through the city is not exactly knowing where I am at any given moment. George Oppen and I used to talk about Cabeza de Vaca, an early Spanish conquistador. We're all the way back in 1510, 1520, not many years after Columbus. The Spanish had, I think, an outpost in Florida—somewhere. Cabeza de Vaca was going to Florida, but there was a shipwreck, and they were blown off course. And he, and two other men (one was a black slave, I believe, and the other was an Indian) were the only survivors. And they walked across the continent... He was the first white European to set foot in what is now the United States. Cabeza de Vaca had no idea where he was. He walked his way westward. He wrote an extraordinary book, *The Journeys*, *The Adventures,* whatever it's called. He became a faith-healer, and he went from tribe to tribe and cured people of their illnesses. And then he would take his caravan and go on to the next place. I think he finally wound up in Mexico where he had all kinds of political problems. It's something that George and I often talked about—the idea of being lost, of having to figure out who you are in relation to space. The idea of being in utter wilderness is a compelling idea.

Then, too, and I think I might have mentioned this in one of my books, maybe *Mr. Vertigo*, Coronado and his men—this was in the 1540s—heard about the Seven Cities of Gold, the mythical domain of Eldorado, the Golden Kingdom. Those gold-hungry Spaniards went up from Mexico into what is today the Midwest. They got to Kansas, which is about the flattest earth in the world—it's just nothing. They didn't know where they were—I'm not sure if they had compasses, but the only way they could advance was for one of them, an archer, to shoot an arrow as straight as he could in front of them, and then they would all go where the arrow had landed, stop, and then the archer would shoot another arrow, and they would go on... Isn't that an extraordinary image? [Laughs] Imagine all of them in their heavy armor, sweating in the Midwestern summer heat. It's kind of comical, isn't it?

NC: It's a funny way to map out the country... It seems to me that the rhythm of your words comes through the process of walking...

PA: I think so, and I said it explicitly in *Winter Journal*. There is a double rhythm in all human beings. We are binary beings—two arms, two legs, two eyes, two ears. Two legs for walking. And the heartbeat thumping in our chest mirrors that. Even when I'm just sitting at my desk, I have to get up every twenty minutes or so and walk around, walk around, walk around, and then I can go back to the page. I can't just sit there for hours at a time. Language comes out of the body as much as the mind. Reading, at the deepest level, is a physical experience. Most people are not attuned to this, most people don't learn how to read—poetry for example, or high-quality prose. They're used to reading magazines and newspapers, which are only of the mind, but not of the body. Take a report. It's dry, the sentences are clunky and unfelicitous, they're just conveying information. But it seems to me that if you're fully engaged in a great piece of literature, once you enter the rhythms of the language, which is a kind of music, meanings are being conveyed that you're not fully aware of. They enter into your subconscious. They're creating as much of the story as the actual words printed on the page are. It's something I always feel alert to. I write different kinds of sentences, depending on what the book is, and what the project is. I see my work evolving. I'm writing long sentences now, something I didn't use to do. I had some kind of breakthrough, five or six years ago, in *Invisible*, and in *Sunset Park* after that. I discovered a new way to write sentences. And I find it exhilarating. Sometimes a sentence goes on for a page or three quarters of a page, two pages—each sentence a kind of musical composition.

NC: Yes, this is linked to another question I wanted to ask you. I remember that in *The New York Trilogy*, or in *Moon Palace*, everything moves very fast, and in your last novels, you tend to take time, to protract time, actually. When an event is taking place very quickly (a car accident, the throwing of a ball into the air...), your sentences suddenly expand and stretch across two or three pages. They seem to incarnate the strange distortion of time that characterizes certain unexpected moments of life. This plastic quality of writing also appears in the various lists you make... Language seems to acquire a vibrating quality, as if it were a continuation of the body it explores. I was wondering about this new rhythm in your writing...

PA: I can't really explain it, you see, it's one of those things that's happening to me. It's been exciting to discover this. I've been working on a new book for the past eleven months, a new novel which is going to be very big. It's the first time I've written something so long, and it's going to take me a few more years to finish. I have 300 pages already. There are lots of long sentences in it. It's been a great adventure, I

feel I'm discovering something new, a different rhythm, and I guess these rhythms have a lot to do with walking, too, but it's a longer trajectory now. I'm traveling greater distances with each sentence. But I don't write about walking that much anymore. In *The Invention of Solitude*, in *City of Glass*, *Winter Journal*—anywhere else? Perhaps in *Moon Palace*.

Sophie Vallas: In the Country of Last Things, also…

PA: Yes, Anna Blume…

NC: I'm thinking about Sydney Orr in *Oracle Night*, coming out of the hospital, and starting to walk again… And also about Nathan Glass, who "lands" in a hospital at the end of *The Brooklyn Follies*, in a chapter called "Inspiration," and feels "inside" and "outside" himself at the same time… And I'm thinking about your writing as a means of breathing in and out… To me, there's a word that characterizes your work, which is the word "hospitality." Your work is generously open to others. And these blanks that you leave in your narratives are both a relief for others and a means of survival for yourself. Fiction then appears as a means of enduring loss and suffering, of making "the pains of the world disappear" for a moment. It seems ethically committed to the world…

PA: Interesting. I never would have thought of that word, "hospitality." I settle into the rhythm of my steps…

NC: That's the end of *Moon Palace*…

PA: Yes. You see, I had no idea… [Reading from *Moon Palace*]: "Once I reached the end of the continent, I felt that some important question would be resolved for me. I had no idea what that question was, but the answer had already been formed in my steps, and I had only to keep walking to know that I had left myself behind, that I was no longer the person I had once been."

SV: I'm especially fond of your autobiographical works, *The Invention of Solitude*, *Winter Journal*, *Report from the Interior*…

PA: Were you thrown off by the strange structure of the new book, *Report from the Interior*? Because it's four things in one…

SV: Well, I have questions about the end, the use of pictures, for instance. In fact, I had never seen the second movie you write about, but I remembered the first one very well. I saw it when I was a child, with my brother…

PA: Unforgettable, right?

SV: Yes, I loved it at the time!

PA: It's an astonishing movie, especially for a young person.

SV: I never forgot the fight against the spider, the character going up the stairs in the end… So it was a nice surprise to read your analysis of the film! How do you consider those three books? Sometimes, the editor or the publisher insists on mentioning "A memoir" on the cover…

PA: I don't like that word. Whenever my publishers have wanted to use it, I've told them to take it away.

SV: So how do you consider those three volumes in your work? Do they constitute a special group of works in your eyes?

PA: Well, actually, there are five of them, *The Invention of Solitude*, *Hand to Mouth*, *The Red Notebook*, the complete one with the four sections, and then the last two, *Winter Journal* and *Report from the Interior*. There are five autobiographical works in all.

SV: And also minor texts, which were gathered in your volume of collective prose.

PA: Yes, autobiographical writings, essays, interviews, various other things… All the non-fiction prose I wanted to keep, that was the idea behind this collected volume, which came out about ten years ago. I didn't think of *Winter Journal*, for example, as an autobiography, or a memoir. What it is is a literary work, composed of autobiographical fragments, but trying to attain, I hope, the effect of music. Music. I think about it more as a poem than as a narrative work of prose, and it works in the way that music works: something is mentioned early and then dropped, and fifty pages later it's picked up again and elaborated, and so things are intersecting in the book in much the way a piece of music works. For better or worse, I might add.

SV: It was already the case in "The Book of Memory," for instance, with all those repetitions and ruptures…

PA: Yes, jumps, and the gaps between things, and then you don't know where that space is going to take you once you get to the next block of prose. It's really a matter of, well, intuition, because you can't really justify it. You know what works and you know what doesn't work.

SV: And when you start working on such a book, are you aware that you're writing differently, that it's something else than fiction?

PA: The mental state I'm in is completely different, but the act of trying to write is the same. I mean, in all instances you try to write good sentences. But in a novel you're free to do whatever you want, and in the autobiographical works you can't make things up. I know people do, but I don't. It's an ethical pact I've made with myself and with the reader—not to invent. And when I can't remember, I say I can't remember. I'm just appalled by the memoirs published by people who regurgitate dialogue, conversations from when they were small children, and they go on for three or four pages. I can't even remember what we said to each other ten minutes ago! How can I remember what was said sixty years ago? It's not possible.

NC: Yet your body remembers, hence the scars…

PA: Yes, well, there are certain signs, certain things that are indelible, but most of our lives simply vanish. We can't recover them. The things we remember are often things that have great emotional importance, and so they have a lasting effect. As Siri says, who is deeply involved with neuroscience, *emotion consolidates memory*, and I think that's true.

SV: It's very difficult to translate the word "memoir" into French, but in France we have this thing which has been going on for twenty years and more, which is called "autofiction"—I know the word is not very much used in English…

PA: I know about this. I think Siri went to a conference in NYU about it. "Autofiction," yes.

SV: And I was wondering about this word in relation to your work. At the beginning of *Report from the Interior*, you write: "Our lives enter a new dimension at that point"—when a child turns six, the birth of self-consciousness—"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." You've just said that when you don't remember, well, you say that you don't remember. But at the same time, we keep writing our own stories… and this is fiction, isn't it?

PA: Well, necessarily, because I don't have all the facts. And I might misremember. As a matter of fact, after I finished *Winter Journal*, I realized that I'd gotten someone's

name wrong. The little boy who was lost, the one who hit me over the head with the rake, the one who had gone missing, and I went into a bush filled with bees, his name wasn't Michael, Michael was his older brother. He was Eric. And it took me some time to remember that, because the boy who was so nasty to me when I was little in the next book—that was Michael, the older brother. And Eric was the younger one. That's one example, but probably there are others I'm not even aware of.

SV: But what people writing about autofiction say is that what you write is more true than the truth… You made a mistake about the boys' names, but what you wrote is probably more important to you than having the right boy in the right box…

PA: But there's a difference between doing this and writing a novel. If I had put the story of the boy killing my dog—and that was Eric also, what a little monster he was! —in a novel, even if I took it directly from life, it would be fiction. It automatically becomes imaginary. But if it's in a book that's not a novel, then it doesn't change, it is what it is, what it was.

SV: You probably know this notion coined by Roland Barthes, "biographèmes"—these events in the life of an author, for instance, which emerge from the rest of his life and become more significant than the rest of it. Another critic adapted the concept to Georges Perec's work and spoke about "autobiographèmes," that is, events taken from their lives that some authors keep using and reusing in their autobiographical writings but not only. There are lots of such events that you use in your autobiographical writings, but also in your novels… For instance, the story about Thomas Edison…

PA: Well, yes, the story about Edison, appears in several of my books, I suppose. Does it appear in a novel? Yes, in fact, it does—in *Moon Palace*. It appears in different autobiographical works as well. I do like Perec very much, even though what I do and what he did are very different. I've devised a new category of writers. Tell me if I'm not on to something or not. It's what I call "boy-writers." I would say that Edgar Allan Poe, Perec, Thomas Pynchon, and Borges are all boy-writers. These are writers who take… a kind of demonic joy in writing. And the pleasure they get just from exercising their imaginations— it's usually not very deep, it's usually not something that will move you, it carries very little emotion, but the cleverness, and the joy of being so clever, communicate some essential thing about why we read books, and why we enjoy books so much.

NC: This joy of playing…

PA: Yes, the play-writers. Tolstoy is not a boy-writer. He's a grown-up. And Doestoeivski is not a boy-writer.

SV: What about you?

PA: I'm not a boy-writer, I've never been. I wanted to be a boy-writer when I was young, and I think that held me back. I wanted to be very clever, and funny, but I'm not very clever and not terribly funny. I've finally accepted my limits, and I do what I can do. But some of those things are so wonderful, so highly entertaining, they just make you so happy to be alive… It's not the only experience that literature can give, but it's one of them, one of the essential ones.

SV: I have the impression that there are threads that weave together your whole work, autobiographical books and novels. Let's take another example: the story of your uncle's books. You manage to blur the distinction between fiction and non fiction, in a way…

PA: Or you can look at my autobiographical pieces as source books… But, you see, my fiction doesn't revolve around autobiographical questions. I use things, I steal things

from my life when I want to, when I need to, or when it seems appropriate. But most of the stuff in my novels is entirely invented, ninety-five percent. And even when I do borrow something, it becomes fictionalized. For example, when I was writing *Leviathan*, which was written both in New York and in Vermont—I think there were two summers in Vermont, in that house I wrote about in *Winter Journal*, that broken-down house... I was working in an out-building, a kind of shack, a tumble-down, broken-down mess of a place, and I had a green table, that's where I had my notebooks, my typewriter. And I thought "Well, it could be interesting if I placed my character Aaron in the room in which I, Auster, am writing the book. He would be writing at the same green table, and, in fact, in the same house that Sacks and his wife used to go to in the summer, that family's, that parents' home would be the house that I'm in now." It doesn't make any difference to the reader, the reader doesn't know. I just thought, "Well, is there a way to bring my life into the fiction I'm writing, will it make a difference?" And the fact is, it doesn't make any difference. It was a kind of experiment which couldn't fail. But I guess it couldn't succeed either. Here was Aaron at the green table I was at, and you say yourself, "So what?"

SV: With the five autobiographical books, one can have the impression that you go back to the beginning, each time, and talking about it, Nathalie and I thought about the process of lithography: thanks to the variations on the pronouns (A., he, you, I...), what we get first is in fact the opposite of what the work is going to be, and then you apply a color in the first book, and another color, and yet another color, changing the filter each time—the death of the father and solitude, and then the life of the body, and then the perception of the growing child...

PA: Yes, money is the driving force of *Hand to Mouth*, the lack of money, and all those true stories about strange things in *The Red Notebook*, coincidences and unlikely events, surprise, the unexpected... Yes, I think you're absolutely right, and that's why I feel they all go together in the end. I think the reason why I wrote *Report from the Interior* was that after I finished *Winter Journal*, I took a pause, and I realized there was more I wanted to say. At first, I thought the book would be what became the first part, the first hundred pages, a little book. But as I was writing that first part, I realized I wanted to write about some of those movies I had seen as a young person, but when I started writing about them the passages became too long, and I would have destroyed the whole rhythm of the first part if I had integrated those other things into it. So I thought, I have to have another section to discuss the two movies. And as I was doing the movies, trying to write about them, I felt it would be interesting to put stills from the movies into the chapter. But I don't like pictures in books. I feel that the pictures diminish the words, and the words diminish the pictures, and it doesn't work. That's when I came up with the idea of another section, a sequence of images and images only. Sections 2 and 4 are all about the visual, and 1 and 3 are all about the verbal. I had no idea I would be writing the third part when I started the book. But as I was working on the first part, the letters from my first wife, my long-ago ex-wife, were coming in. Five hundred pages of letters, it was astonishing. And the strange experience of encountering a stranger who happened to have been me once upon a time. It was an eerie feeling. I thought, "Well, I'm writing about early childhood, so maybe it would make sense to write about late childhood as well, early adulthood, in the third part." Those were my thoughts, and this was how this crazy book was composed. I've never seen a book with pictures like at the end, pictures related to things you've read before.

SV: With parts of the previous text used as captions, too…

PA: Yes, taken directly from the earlier text. It took me a long time to find the pictures. I worked on the photos for months. It took longer to find them than to write the section about the films. I was told about a photo researcher, a woman whose sole job in the world is to do this kind of work. She helped me, I had to pay for the permissions, it was a very complicated business. And we had to get everything in high definition, otherwise the photos wouldn't have been printable.

SV: I especially like the parts about you as a child, those moments when suddenly you understand something. You manage to convey the moment, the slowness of it, as if time was suspended and expanded…

PA: Can you give me an example?

SV: When the child is looking at the squirrels, or insects, for instance, and one has the feeling that there is some meaning slowly coming to his consciousness. For some reason, it made me think of the way Terrence Malick films the three boys in *The Tree of Life*…

PA: It's a very uneven film, but I think the good parts in it are sublime. The childhood scenes are tremendous. My favorite moment is when the mother levitate—for three seconds. Of course, this is how a child thinks of his mother.

SV: I like the way the boys are looking at what's happening when they're outside. The wind's blowing, the trees are slowly moving, we don't know what's going on in their minds but something *is* going on. It's exactly what I feel when I read your pages. I was wondering why you spend so much time writing about your childhood whereas in your fiction, there aren't many children…

PA: [Thoughtful] No. Well, more than you think, more than you think…

SV: *Mr. Vertigo*…

PA: Wait a second, wait a second. In *The Locked Room*, there are the two boys. They're not prominent, but they're present, especially toward the end. And then, I'm trying to think… *In the Country of Last Things*, no. In *Moon Palace*, Fogg is a little boy…

SV: But the novel focuses more on his teenage years and his becoming an adult…

PA: I'm trying to think. *The Music of Chance*, no, *Leviathan*, not really… You're right, there aren't many children. There's Lucy in *Brooklyn Follies*, and Walt in *Mr. Vertigo*. But in *Invisible* there's a lot about childhood, the death of the brother and then the relationship between the brother and sister. You're right, there are often references to childhood, but they're rarely the focus of the novels, you're right. But, you see, the interesting thing about the book I'm writing now is that it comes out of the two autobiographical books I've just written. What I'm trying to do is to tell the story of a man's life from birth, but there are different versions of him, four different versions. I have three hundred pages so far, and of the four, none is older than sixteen at this point. There's so much about childhood—until now, it's been a book all about childhood.

NC: You've mentioned several versions of the same character in the same story… In your novels, you tend to have several versions of the same event, and on the outskirts of fiction, you also reformulate the same anecdotes, accidents of decisive moments of your life. At the level of discourse, sentences constantly rephrase themselves… You often use expressions such as "In other words," "To say it in another way"…

PA: It's a mind going over things, revisiting things, maybe trying to refine the original perception. You have to keep going a thing over in order to make sense off it.

NC: And avoid fixed meanings, in a way. I was thinking about your experience as a translator. Does it affect your writing? In "White Spaces," such an important text, you seem to constantly translate sentences into other versions of themselves. Meaning is never fixed but open to infinite possibilities… You then succeed in speaking about silence, not so much by describing the movements of the dancers as by turning your text into a dance of words…

PA: I wanted to write about nothing. I wanted words just to be words, but I wanted those words to accompany a dance. Somebody in France is trying to do it, to make a show of it. I don't know if he's getting anywhere, I'm not sure, but there's something under way. I hope it happens.

NC: Melville wrote that whiteness is "colorless, all color"—whiteness is presence and absence at the same time… You said about "White Spaces" that it is an act of translation. It then seems to me that the art of translation is present in your work, not as a means of translating one language into another, but as a means of constantly reformulating words and sentences, of ceaselessly erasing and rephrasing them, in order to make them visible…

PA: I don't really think so… Maybe you're right, I don't know, I don't think that what you've said has so much to do with it. Plus, I haven't done any translating for decades now. It's something I did when I was young.

NC: I remember what you said about some poets' vision of the city. Because they're in-between languages—I'm thinking about Louis Wolfson, for instance, in *The Art of Hunger*—they tend to see things differently, as if they were discovering the city for the first time… Very often you evoke New York as a kind of Babel-like place. In *The Brooklyn Follies*, Lucy evolves from silence to an imitation of all the languages she hears on the streets of Brooklyn and thus illuminates the most ordinary events of urban life… I was thinking of this kind of floating between languages as a means of creating a new kind of vision, of intensifying perception, anybody's perception of a city, of a place… Isn't it also what you said about Reznikoff?

PA: Reznikoff was in between faiths, in between worlds… a double, hyphenated American. I think it probably goes deeper than that. There is a line from the Marina Tsvetaeva poem I'm so fond of, you know: "In this most Christian of worlds/ All poets are Jews." What she means is that writers and artists are outside the normal flow of daily life, the normal flow of society in general. We're outsiders, and so when we walk through the city, we're there and not there at the same time, participating and observing simultaneously.

NC: This is what Whitman used to say…

PA: Yes… And most people are part of it, most people are participating in the grand adventure of living with one another. It would be a terrible world if everyone was an artist. Nothing would get done! We wouldn't even have teapots and tea! I believe that every artist, in one way or another, is a wounded person. It's not natural to make art. Most people just want to be part of the world, they want to live, love, and enjoy themselves—to take part in the world around them. Whereas artists are always retreating, locking the door, and inventing other worlds. And why would anyone want to do that?

SV: Because from the very beginning you have the ability to tell the story of your life…

PA: It makes me think of Joubert, my beloved Joseph Joubert—whom I guess nobody knows about in France anymore, he seems to have vanished. I talk about him to people and they say, "Who are you talking about?" One of the entries in his notebooks reads as follows: "Those for whom the world is not enough—philosophers, poets, and all readers of books." [Laughs] So you're part of the game, too.

NC: Speaking of voices, I have also noticed that in your recent novels, the marks of punctuation seem to disappear, as if you were erasing the traces of dialogues…

PA: I don't want to use quotation marks anymore, I've gone back and forth with them. In *Ghosts,* I didn't use them, for instance, all the way back in the early eighties. But I had some emotional reasons for not wanting to use quotation marks in that book, too complicated to go into now. And then, in my later novels, I systematically used the convention, and then a moment came—when did it come? With *The Book of Illusions*, maybe—I thought, I don't need them anymore, I don't need them, I want to integrate the dialogue into the text.

NC: And into the voice of the narrator as well…

PA: Yes. In fact, in what I'm writing now, there's very little dialogue. It's a book of pure narration. People do speak now and again, but what they say is mostly integrated into the paragraph. No quotation marks. Sometimes italics for memorable sentences, but otherwise dialogue is integrated into the text.

NC: Just a last, symbolic question: we're going to cross the Brooklyn Bridge when we go back to Manhattan… I'm thinking about this passage in *The Brooklyn Follies*, when Tom relates his crossing of the bridge at the "very moment a full moon rises into the arch" and experiences a feeling of transcendence that is strangely related in very concrete terms: "Leaving your body behind you and entering the fullness and thickness of the world." I like to imagine the Brooklyn Bridge as an emblem of the dance of your words over the rifts of time. In *Winter Journal*, you have this beautiful description of the bridge, "the thick stone of the medieval Gothic arches at odds with and yet in harmony with the delicate spider webs of steel cables." This, to me, is very much an image of your work, this association of grace and gravity…

PA: You just made me think of something, which is, again, a combination of two things. You could say that the bridge is both old and new, it's tradition and innovation at the same time. For 1883, what a remarkable invention it was. I met Peter Brook, the theater director, who's been based in Paris for many years at the Bouffes du Nord. I admire him tremendously. Some years ago, he was in New York, and he gave an interview with *The Times*, and what he said was this: "In my work, I try to capture the closeness of the everyday and the distance of myth. Because, without the closeness, you can't be moved, and without the distance, you can't be amazed." Isn't that extraordinary? I think this is what I've been trying to do all my life—that. And he articulated it in two sentences. I've been groping for a way to think about this, and your words about the bridge made me think about that. Because it's the everyday and the mythic, all in one structure.

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