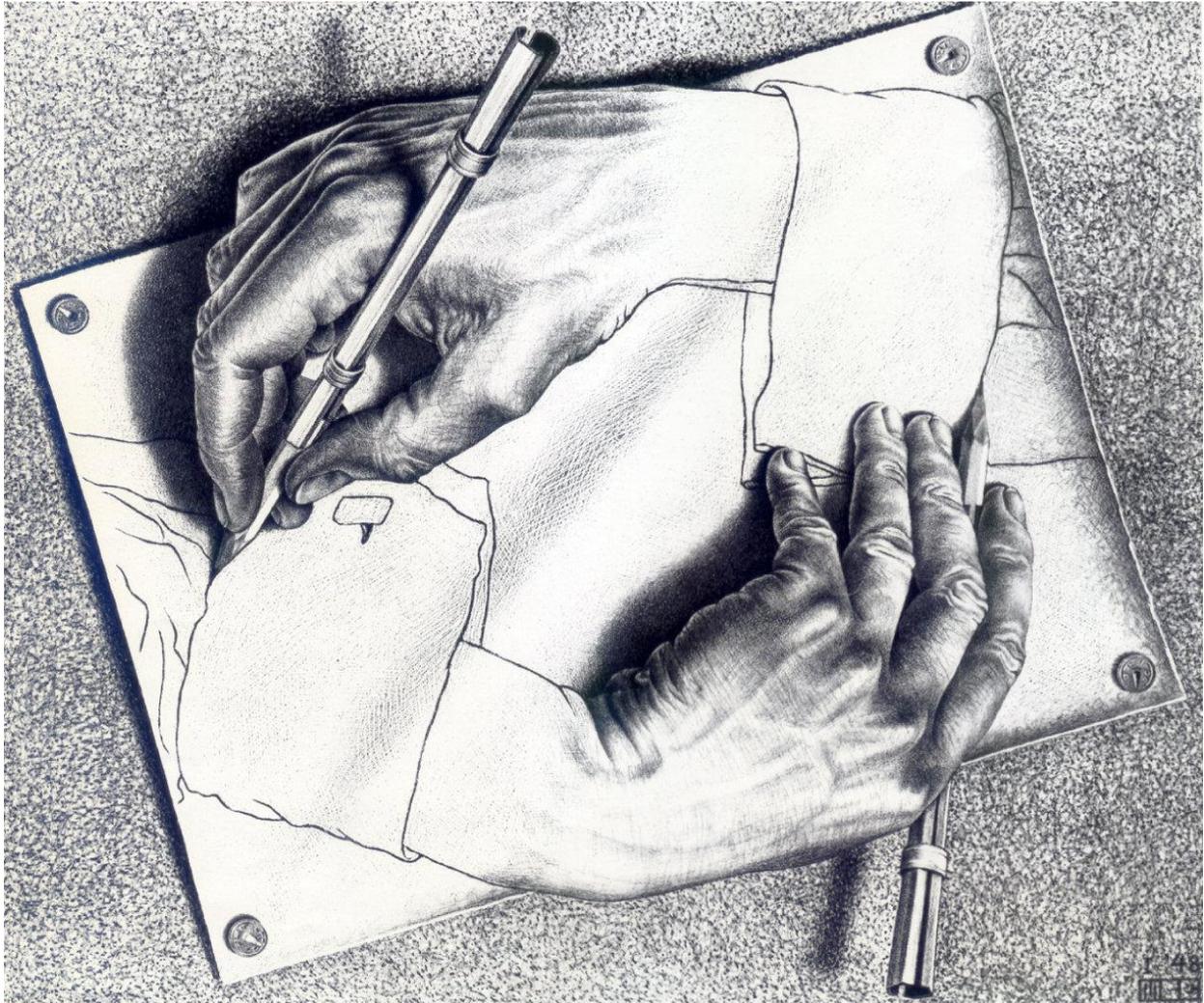


The Embodied Author: Problems of Authorship in the Work of Paul Auster



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¹ Drawing by M.C. Escher, *Drawing Hands* (1948).

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The Embodied Author: Problems of Authorship in the Work of Paul Auster

In 1968 Roland Barthes declared that the Author was dead. No longer was there one overruling interpretation that critics could find by going on a scholarly treasure hunt (Barthes, *The Death of the Author* 1325). The figure called the Author, that was presented as the God of his work and whose intentions were the key to deciphering his text, had now lost his authority. The reader was empowered and the author's reign was over. One year later, Michel Foucault responded by arguing that the Author was now reduced to a few functions, which were mainly legal and historical: the Author was present in the text, but only as a provider of historical or cultural background for the text or the holder of the copyright. This 'author-function' "does not refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy." (Foucault 1485). When it came to the interpretation of a text, the Author was of small consequence. These theories came at the right time: in the middle of the student protests in Paris, a theory overthrowing authority was of course quite welcome. The theory had therefore immediate revolutionary status. The word of Barthes and Foucault wasn't final in the late sixties, however. Seán Burke discusses in his book *The Death and Return of the Author* (1992) the effect the theory of the death of the Author had in the field of literary theory and shows that the theory wasn't as widely accepted as one would think, even though it was popular in certain academic circles. Surprisingly, the theoretical discussion on authority stayed almost exclusively between Barthes, Foucault and Jacques Derrida. They were the leading figures in the discussion and Burke discusses the works of all three of them to paint the picture of the discussion. He also offers a critique of the theory of the death of the Author and argues that there never really was a death, because even the scholars who announced this death let the author return as guest. (Barthes, *From Work to Text* 1329-30). The question of authority remains unanswered and it is quite possible that it will never be answered. Barthes's essay is continued to be challenged by various scholars, however, even though Burke described the return of the author.² One of these scholars is John Zilcosky, who wrote his essay *The Revenge of the Author* thirty years after the supposed death of the Author. He offered an Author that complicated the theory provided by Barthes and Foucault; an Author who immersed himself into his texts and whose voice lingers in the reader's head: Paul Auster works with the relation between author, text and reader and with questions of authority in his fiction. Fourteen works of fiction come from his hand and (almost) all of them deal with these issues. Even in his non-fiction work he discusses questions of authority and

² One of the scholars who challenged Barthes was William Gass, who wrote an essay under the same title.

representation. It is in his fiction, however, that the question of authority can be explored and where new insights on authorship can be found. Auster started his career in fiction with three short novels that were combined in *The New York Trilogy* (1987). In these works he explored the relationship between detective and criminal, which, as scholars in the past have pointed out, is similar to the relationship between reader and author (Todorov). In his essay, Zilcosky dives into this relationship and argues that Auster is working with the question of what happens after the death of the Author. After the character that represented the author dies in the story, Auster shows his readers what might happen next. Moreover, he keeps referring to himself as the Author and leaving fragments of himself in different characters. Zilcosky concludes that Auster the Author may be dead, but his ghost, the implied author, is alive and well. He eventually names Auster a “virtuosic anti-author,” which is an author, who seems to claim authority, but undermines it at the same time and rewrites while he reads, like a Barthesian producer (Barthes, *S/Z* 4). Zilcosky argues that Auster challenges the theory, but not just by claiming back authority over his texts: he presents himself as a Barthesian producer, who does not control his own fiction and lives through the implied author in his text. In this thesis this theory will be taken a step further. The combination of Auster’s early work and authorship has already been explored by Zilcosky, but in Auster’s later work a different image of the author emerges and new ideas on authorship can be developed out of it. The novels I have chosen to help illustrate that image are *Oracle Night* (2003) and *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006). Both novels deal explicitly with writers. They both have pieces of Auster himself in them and above all, they are closely connected to each other through one manuscript referred to in both novels. Auster’s later work is a great place to examine questions of authority, because he himself is obsessed by the question, which is clearly visible in his fiction. As I have mentioned above, in almost all of his fourteen novels he has dealt with this question. Since Auster is so aware of the problems of authorship and works with it explicitly, his work is a good place to look for answers to the problem. This thesis will argue that, in his novels *Oracle Night* and *Travels in the Scriptorium* Paul Auster opposes the theory of the death of the Author presented by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault and creates an image of an embodied author – in contrast to an ‘author-function’: a more human one as opposed to the God-like Author described by the aforementioned scholars. To substantiate this claim, I will first relay the theory developed by Barthes and Foucault and eventually Zilcosky and discuss briefly the discussion on authority in general. After that, I will demonstrate how Auster makes claims of authority in his novels. In the next chapter, I will discuss how Auster takes that authority to separate himself as an embodied author as opposed to the Author-god and the ‘author-function’ and reminds his

readers that he is also a reader. Finally, I will conclude with suggestions for further research and discuss some points of criticism.

Wanted dead or alive: the theoretical discussion regarding the Author and his Authority

As is related above, Barthes' theory supposedly ended the era in which the Author was the God of his work. He argued that critics should not try to see the Author as the key to the 'true' interpretation of a text, holding a biography of the Author's life at hand that should provide the elements to decipher the text. That notion is limiting. Without the Author in the picture texts would lose their shackles and the 'true' interpretation would lie with the reader, which makes it impossible to pinpoint, untraceable and, above all, several interpretations can exist at the same time. This was a positive development, because the text would now be opening up instead of being limited by only one interpretation. Jacques Derrida supported this idea when he argued that there is nothing outside the text. There is no longer a notion that one meaning rules them all. Barthes offers as argument for the shift of focus from Author to reader that even if one were to look for the Author's intentions, he is so entangled with other texts that it is never he who speaks, but language. (Barthes 1323). Once the Author starts writing, he is dead to the text, because language has started. Having knowledge of an Author's biography is not necessary in this context, because "language knows a 'subject,' not a 'person,' and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together,' suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it." (Barthes, *The Death of the Author* 1323).

The idea of language knowing only a 'subject' is supported by Michel Foucault, who goes on to explain what this subject is in his essay "What is an Author?" The part to fill the void left by the departed Author is the 'author-function', which consists of legal and historical elements. Foucault describes four features this 'author-function' consists of. The first of these features is that books or texts with authors are forms of property "whose legal codification was accomplished some years ago." (Foucault 1482). This refers to the copyright system and the legal institutions. The second feature is that the 'author-function' is not everywhere and not always the same in all discourse. There have, for example, been stories in the past that weren't attributed to authors, like folk tales. The third feature of the 'author-function' is that "it is not formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual. It results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author." (Foucault 1483). Added to that, the author is constructed from his place in history: he is "a definite historical figure in which a series of events converge." (Foucault 1484). The last feature is that the 'author-function' does not refer to "an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos

and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy.” (Foucault 1485). This feature coincides with Barthes’ idea of the author as a ‘subject’ instead of a ‘person.’ The author Foucault describes comes across as an empty figure – merely a function. In contrast to Barthes, Foucault places the author in the text, but at the same time, there is not really an author to speak of: just a vehicle to pinpoint the time, place and circumstances the text exists in; that has some legal privileges and gives certain collections of texts some consistency. Foucault concludes his essay the same way he started it: with the question asked by Samuel Beckett ‘what matters who’s speaking?’ This indicates Foucault’s wish that in the future we would not take the author into account at all.

These ideas painted a very grim future for the author. The discussion didn’t stop there, however. Seán Burke composes a history of the discussion on authority and the death of the Author and criticizes the original theory at the same time. About the discussion itself, Burke argues that “‘The Death of the Author’ has not become ... the centre of debate or discussion.” (S. Burke 20). He described that scholars either accepted the theory without question or were vehemently against it; “many, many readers have been convinced that – even taken on the level of its own premises – ‘The Death of the Author’ is quite wrong and yet have been stymied by their inability to say quite why.” (S. Burke 20). Barthes’ essay has, in other words, provoked readers, because they felt they didn’t agree, but at the same time, it was never really challenged for the simple reason that no one seemed to find the right words. Burke himself offers the necessary criticism, however, but also reminds the reader of how to read Barthes’ text in the context of his other works. He reminds us, for example, of the relation of the Death of the Author to the Death of God at the end of the nineteenth century; that “the text is read as natural theologians read nature for marks of design, signs of purpose. Where there is design there must be a designer, where there is the appearance of meaning there must be intention.” (S. Burke 22). By making this connection between the death of God and the death of the Author, Burke shows us that Barthes was targeting a certain Author, which was the realist Author and thereby that it could be argued that the essay wasn’t targeted at other kinds of authors.³ Burke reminds us how to read Barthes, before we offer any criticism. He does agree with Barthes on several subjects, but he raises some important issues that are unexplained. On the idea of language knowing only a subject, Burke argues that “naturally, we must agree with Barthes, Lacan and others, that no subjectivity precedes a language that has evolved for millennia before the subject utters its first inchoate words, but this in no way impedes with the ability of an author to work [...] innovatively with and within language.” (S. Burke 167). In other words, he agrees

³ More on this further on.

with the scholars that an author is in some way dependent on language and language has preceded his life by a long way. However, that doesn't mean that an author cannot create something new within that language. Regarding the author as subject rather than a person, Burke adds that "if the author is the site of collision between language, culture, class, history, episteme, there is still every reason to assume that the resultant subject should be constructed in each case differently, the psyche thus forged being irreducible to any one of those forces in particular. Short of taking this line of reasoning to the ludicrous extreme of asserting that subjects are constituted homogeneously, the difference between subjects remains to be explained." (S. Burke 167). Put differently, one could say that, even though an author is constructed within certain contexts that can be similar to the contexts of other people, he can still be an individual, because there is always something different. This is the kind of criticism Burke offers and there are questions he asks that are indeed unexplored by Barthes and others, which makes one doubt the original theory or at least ask for further explanations.

The theory provided by Barthes and Foucault is also challenged by Zilcosky, a scholar who offers Paul Auster as an author who does not deal with his theoretical death quietly. Zilcosky takes Auster's *The New York Trilogy* with the detective-theme as his main text and demonstrates in his essay that Auster reenacts the death of the author in literary theory in his fiction: his author-criminal dies and the detective-reader must now find a way to deal with a case (work) without its culprit (creator). At the same time, Auster adds autobiographical elements to his main character and even names one of the characters 'Paul Auster' who is married to 'Siri,' has a son named 'Daniel' and is a writer. Zilcosky argues that Auster seems to claim authority by calling out "I'm the writer" throughout his novels in the form of his fragmented selves, but in fact he disrupts the notion that an author 'controls' his fiction by making himself appear and disappear throughout the three stories. Readers "discover that [their] 'author' exists – but only as shards, as pieces of his fictionalized personal history." (Zilcosky 204). He also states that Auster, "by transferring authority from himself to the Narrator ... 'kills' himself and reinvents himself as an implied author." (Zilcosky 199). A shattered, ghost-like author is what Zilcosky imagines and he concludes that Auster is not just a normal author, but a virtuosic anti-author, which means Auster rewrites while he reads (like a Barthesian producer) and undermines his control of his fiction. The following chapters of this thesis will show that in Auster's later work, he creates a different image of the author: instead of the shattered, ghost-like, virtuosic anti-author, Auster's figure represents a more human, yet authoritative author who is also a reader and Barthesian producer.

Reclaiming of Authority

As I have mentioned above, Auster is trying to portray an image of the author in his later fiction. In an interview in *The Paris Review* Auster describes the kind of author he always liked, which was one who showed that the work of fiction the reader was reading was an illusion and that the work of fiction had a flesh-and-blood author. These novels “posit the work as an illusion – which more traditional forms of narrative don’t – and once you accept the ‘unreality’ of the enterprise, it paradoxically enhances the truth of the story. The words aren’t written in stone by an invisible author-god. They represent the efforts of a flesh-and-blood human being, and this becomes very compelling. The reader becomes a participant in the unfolding of the story – not just a detached observer.” (Auster, *Collected Prose* 571). Auster as a reader appreciates these kinds of authors and he can present his author-self the same way. Auster himself ‘posits the work as an illusion.’ He accomplishes this by making himself a part of his fiction. Consequently, he breaks the illusion of his fiction, invites the reader in to participate and he makes himself indispensable to the interpretation of his story.

Like in *The New York Trilogy*, Auster immerses himself into his later work. This is most apparent in *Travels in the Scriptorium*. The main character, a Mr. Blank, is (possibly) locked in a room and being held under observation with cameras and microphones. He has been placed there on his own suggestion and is cared for and bothered by several characters that seem familiar to the observant reader (and, ideally, a reader who has read more of Auster’s work). When the story progresses it becomes clear that this Mr. Blank is some representation of Auster himself, because he has sent several characters that appear on ‘missions’ in the past. The characters that make an appearance bear the names and the characteristics of characters from Auster’s other novels. For example, in this following paragraph Mr. Blank is looking at the photographs he has found on his desk. These photographs are placed there by his doctor, in order to record how much Mr. Blank remembers each day of his past and the people he sent on ‘missions.’ On the photographs he sees:

An old man in a wheelchair, as thin and delicate as a sparrow, wearing the dark glasses of the blind [Thomas Effing, Moon Palace] ... A frighteningly obese man with an immense hairless head and a cigar jutting from his mouth [Solomon Barber, Moon Palace] ... An older man, perhaps in his mid-fifties, lying on the sofa with his legs propped up on a pile of pillows [John Trause, Oracle Night]. A bearded, scraggly-

*looking homeless person sitting on a sidewalk with his arms around a large mutt [Willy Christmas with Mr. Bones, Timbuktu]. (Auster, Travels in the Scriptorium 45)*⁴

These characters – and all the other characters that appear – are called Mr. Blank’s operatives and he has sent them on ‘missions in the past’. Mr. Blank could represent Paul Auster himself, because he has sent these characters on missions in his past (his earlier work) as well. Moreover, as Zilcosky mentioned, Auster puts pieces of himself in some of the characters in *The New York Trilogy* (Zilcosky 204) and of those characters Quinn and Fanshawe make a guest-appearance in *Travels in the Scriptorium*. Do these characters still have those parts of Auster, or is that no longer relevant, because they appear in another story? There is no evidence that Quinn still holds a fragment of Auster’s identity within him, except, of course, if you take into account that Quinn is Mr. Blank’s lawyer in the novel, which means he *represents* him – and therefore Auster as well. When it comes to Fanshawe, the fragment is definitely there. The last manuscript that Mr. Blank reads is a manuscript written by Fanshawe and is called *Travels in the Scriptorium*. It has the same beginning as the actual book, which not only brings the whole story to a meta-level, but it also raises the question of who the author really is. This image is quite beautifully illustrated by Escher in his *Drawing Hands*⁵. By looking at two hands drawing each other or reading about a character writing the book he himself is in, the reader is distracted from the actual author or artist. However, it also underlines the fictitiousness of the work – it breaks the illusion – and therefore attracts attention to the author (or artist) at the same time. Since Fanshawe is posing to be the creator of the novel, he has a part of Auster in him, because Auster is of course the real author of the work.

In *Oracle Night*, an older version of the main character, Orr, narrates the events spanning across a few weeks that changed his life. Orr himself had just had a near-death experience after an accident, but is already recovering at the beginning of the story. He is a writer, but due to the accident he hasn’t written anything in a while. The story starts with him buying a new blue notebook at a strange shop owned by M.R. Chang. He tells the story of how he met his wife Grace and illustrates his relationship to his wife’s friend – and now his best friend – John Trause, who is an older and bestselling author. Orr paraphrases at the same time the stories he is writing in the blue notebook. The reader encounters more fragments of Auster himself in this novel: this time there are also autobiographical elements added to the story. The first fragment of Auster is located in the character John Trause. Aside from the obvious autobiographical element – being an older, established, bestselling author – Trause has more in

⁴ Names and titles of books added by me

⁵ See front page

common with Auster. Firstly, they share the same letters of their last name: Trause is an anagram of Auster (Patteson 124).⁶ Secondly, there are other autobiographical elements to his life that coincide with Auster: being married twice and having a grown son, for example. Lastly, there is the illness that kills him: the blood-clot in his leg. Trause says himself in a letter written to Sidney Orr that it is a “strange fact: the clot was brought on by my own cheapness. Ten days before the pain started, I made a lightening trip to Paris - back and forth in thirty-six hours - to talk at the funeral of my old friend and translator Philippe Joubert. I flew coach, slept both ways, and the doctor says that's what did it. All cramped up in those midjet seats. From now on, I only travel first class.” (Auster, *Oracle Night* 195). For those readers who have read Auster’s latest book *Winter Journal*, where he explores the past of his own body, this illness should sound familiar: Auster himself experienced the same thing – except it did not kill him. (Auster, *Winter Journal* 20). Trause is not the only one, however, that bears a resemblance to Auster; Sidney Orr is thought to be an alternative Auster as well. Richard Patteson writes in his essay *The Teller’s Tale* that “Orr’s own name is first understood by Chang in the Paper Palace as *Or*, implying a continuous displacement of signification. *Or* always indicates an alternative. Orr is an alternative Auster, one at an earlier stage of both life and career, whose imperative it finally becomes to narratize himself and Trause/Auster into the reality of *Oracle Night*.” (Patteson 124). In both novels there are several characters that resemble Auster in some way and they keep reminding the (observant) reader who the author of the work is. Also, the interpretation of the story is, because of this constant reminder, closely connected to Auster himself, because he is an obvious part of the story. Immersing himself is not his only way of reminding the reader of the author. Auster employs another way of claiming authority that is related to the immersion of his self, is the coherence of his work. To read *Travels in the Scriptorium* and to understand it as well asks for a certain knowledge of the reader. Not only should the reader have read all Auster’s other novels to ‘get’ the references to the characters, he should have read them in a certain order. To read *Travels in the Scriptorium* before any other novel would immediately make the reading experience less comprehensible. Auster almost forces the reader to read the rest of his work and read it in the order he has thought out. Moreover, the reader should know something about Auster himself too, if he were to understand the autobiographical elements of the story. By making himself omnipresent in his stories and making characters appear and reappear in several novels, Auster weaves himself into the meaning of the story and he makes himself indispensable to the interpretation of the story.

⁶ Auster does a similar thing in other novels as well. For example, in *Leviathan* his main character is named Peter Aaron (they share the same initials) and is married to Iris (Siri, the name of Auster’s real wife, spelled backwards).

Finally, there are a few smaller elements in both novels that could be interpreted as claims of authority. One of these elements is the leitmotif Auster uses throughout these novels; an image that keeps coming back.⁷ In *Travels in the Scriptorium* it first appears in the manuscript written by Trause: "I am sitting at the table, listening to the pen as it scratches along the surface of the paper. I stop. I dip the pen into the inkwell, then watch the black shapes form as I move my hand slowly from left to right." (Auster, *Travels in the Scriptorium* 37). Further on in the story, it appears again: "Several seconds later, [Mr. Blank] is sitting at his desk, the ballpoint pen in his right hand, the little pad in front of him, opened to the first page." (Auster, *Travels in the Scriptorium* 113). In *Oracle Night*, the same image appears when Orr has just bought the blue notebook: "So I removed the cap from my pen, pressed the point against the top line of the first page in the blue notebook, and started to write." (Auster, *Oracle Night* 12). This image of the writing author keeps coming back in both novels several times: too many times not to be noticed. It could be an authority claim, because it keeps reminding the reader of the author behind the story – grasping his pen, sitting at his desk and creating the very words the reader is reading now. Auster gives the reader a peek into his creative process by working in this imagery and makes the reader think about his creative power. Also, it contributes to the breaking of the illusion: the focus on the fictitious framework, the unreality of the work. The last few elements I want to pay attention to are quotes from both novels that add to the idea of the author as an authoritative figure. In *Travels in the Scriptorium*, the characters Auster created have a chance to talk to their creator and several of them credit his creative power over them. Anna Blume (*In the Country of Last Things*) for example, says: "The fact is, Mr. Blank, without you I wouldn't be anyone." (Auster, *Travels in the Scriptorium* 25). Other characters like Fanshawe (*The Locked Room* and Narrator of *Travels in the Scriptorium*) and James P. Flood (*The Locked Room*) also mention that they owe their existence to Mr. Blank. (Auster, *Travels in the Scriptorium* 144, 59). In *Oracle Night*, Orr's power is illustrated in his choices of setting and events – for example, when Orr decides to "give Nick light, then, and allow him a shred of hope" (Auster, *Oracle Night* 119) and when he uses the characteristics of Trause's apartment and the event and setting of his (Orr's) meeting his wife for the first time in his fiction. Orr creates his fictional world with elements of his own life, much like Auster himself and this makes the reader aware of the author's creative process and with that his authority over his own text.

⁷ This leitmotif is found not only in the novels discussed in this thesis, but in other works as well, like, for example, *The New York Trilogy* and *Moon Palace*.

By immersing himself in his fiction, Auster weaves himself into the interpretation of the story and claims back the authority Barthes and others took away from him. At the same time, he breaks the illusion of the unreality of his fiction and invites the reader into his work.

The embodied author: reading, writing, rewriting

Judging from the evidence demonstrated above, it seems that Auster has sold himself off as the ultimate authoritative figure. The critics agree with the picture Auster seems to have painted. One critic called *Auster's Travels in the Scriptorium* "an arrogantly self-congratulating text, jocular rather than pretentious." (Sorensen). A passage from *Oracle Night*, where Sidney Orr tells in one of the footnotes the story of how he had met Trause, supports this claim of Auster being an arrogant writer: "I therefore met him as a family friend, not as the well-known novelist I had been reading since high school - and whom I still considered to be one of the best writers we had." (Auster, *Oracle Night* 11). If Richard Patteson is correct, then this is the young Auster (Orr) praising the older Auster (Trause). This is a very narrow reading of Auster's work, however. After a closer look at the text, there is evidence that Auster is not portraying the author as an arrogant figure. He is not just claiming authority in these two novels; he is presenting a different kind of author than either Barthes, Zilcosky or in fact the critics illustrated. The first evidence of this is the way the fragmented parts of Auster are portrayed. His characters – or fragments of himself – are not presented as gods that rule over their fiction. In fact, they are quite the opposite. Mr. Blank, for instance, is an old man, who is not only struggling with problems of memory, but with quite humiliating body problems as well. Throughout the story, Mr. Blank vomits, goes to the bathroom (and this experience is explicitly told), comes to a sexual climax, slips and falls to the floor, crawls around on all fours to deal with dizziness and he wets his pants. These are not the actions of a god-like figure. The characters that are supposed to represent Auster in *Oracle Night* are weak when it comes to their bodies too: Orr has just had a near-death experience and deals daily with dizziness and nosebleeds and Trause dies of a blood clot in his leg.⁸ These bodily weaknesses seem to work as a reminder of a certain aspect of the author: his humanity. Auster does not present himself in his fiction as the vanished, shattered or ghost-like function Foucault, Barthes and Zilcosky had in mind, nor does he present himself as the invisible author-god that reigned before the death of the Author. In *Oracle Night* and *Travels in the Scriptorium* he has found a way to show the true nature of the author – or at least the

⁸ Several of Auster's novels have characters in them that deal with sickness and weakness of the body. In *Moon Palace*, for example, M.S. Fogg almost dies of starvation, Thomas Effing is blind and crippled and Solomon Barber is heavily overweight and dies after a fall into a grave. The best example of Auster's interest in the body is, of course, his latest non-fiction work *Winter Journal*, in which he explores the history of his own body.

kind of author he thinks he is: one with a body. Like Barthes, Auster wondered about the realist Authors who maintained the illusion that their work was real and that they were the gods behind it. He asks: “where are the words coming from? Who’s saying this? The third-person narrative voice in the traditional novel is a strange device. We’re used to it now, we accept it, we don’t question it anymore. But when you stop and think about it, there’s an eerie, disembodied quality to that voice. It seems to come from nowhere, and I found that disturbing.” (Auster, Collected Prose 571). Auster himself has found a way to separate himself from those kinds of Authors by giving his writer-figures a very distinctive body and by breaking the illusion. He says:

I was always drawn to books that doubled back on themselves, that brought you into the world of the book, even as the book was taking you into the world. The manuscript as hero, so to speak. [...] [Those books] posit the work as an illusion – which more traditional forms of narrative don’t – and once you accept the ‘unreality’ of the enterprise, it paradoxically enhances the truth of the story. The words aren’t written in stone by an invisible author-god. They represent the efforts of a flesh-and-blood human being, and this becomes very compelling. The reader becomes a participant in the unfolding of the story – not just a detached observer. (Auster, Collected Prose 571).

The fact that ‘the reader becomes a participant in the unfolding of the story’ is very important in Auster’s work. He is presenting himself always first and foremost as a reader. A very important part of the theory of Barthes is the importance of the reader and the opening up of the text. Auster’s reclaiming of authority could endanger this, but it doesn’t, because he is equalizing himself. Any reader of Auster notices his references to other texts and how his writer-protagonists are always well-read and linking their own lives to the literature they have read. In *Oracle Night*, for example, Orr uses the elements of a story taken from Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* (Auster, *Oracle Night* 11) and he adapts the story *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells for the movie screen. (Auster, *Oracle Night* 102). Also, in *Travels in the Scriptorium*, Mr. Blank spends most of his time reading manuscripts. In fact, the only words he writes down are the names of the people around him. The fact that the author is a reader, then, is very important to Auster. He describes his writer-characters – and since they are fragments of himself he describes himself as well – as readers.⁹ Therefore, Auster could transform in the eyes of his readers from ‘just’ the author to someone just like them: it makes him more accessible, more human. This contributes to the earlier argument of him being a human author. Added to that, Auster describes the kind of reader

⁹ For more information on Auster as reader, Alik Varvogli wrote her book *The World That is the Book* about intertextuality and his legacies.

Barthes would call 'virtuosic.' The fact that Mr. Blank *re-writes* one of the manuscripts – Trause's story – has some significance in this case, since Barthes spend some time writing about the reader as a producer in his work *S/Z*. Zilcosky already mentioned it in his essay that "we could argue that Auster ... emerges from the rubble of dead author-criminals to become a virtuosic Barthesian 'producer' – a reader who rewrites while reading." (Zilcosky 203). However, Zilcosky does not explain what this would mean; he reminds us only that Auster keeps claiming authority and this would not make him 'virtuosic' to Barthes. (Zilcosky 203). Auster and Barthes are not thinking that differently as Zilcosky makes us think, however, if the Author Barthes was describing was only the realist Author. Auster marks the invisible author-god as one that is quite strange and argues that the books that 'double back on themselves' are truer, because there is a flesh-and-blood human being who is writing it, as opposed to the 'invisible author-god' – the same Author Barthes is fighting. In his own fiction, then, Auster makes an effort to claim back authority of the flesh-and-blood author, who was treated homogenous to the 'invisible, realist author-god.' He offers criticism to the homogenization of authors in Barthes' essay through his fiction. The fact that he also presents himself as a virtuosic reader, should also contribute to the idea that the goals of Auster and Barthes are not that far apart. The rewriting is a recurring theme in Auster's work: in *Oracle Night* Orr doesn't only read Hammett and Wells, but rewrites their work as well and Mr. Blank rewrites the manuscript written by Trause. In *Oracle Night* especially, the rewriting does not only mean rewriting of other literary texts, but rewriting of the lives of the characters as well. For example, Orr writes out a possible course of events that describe a past affair between his wife and Trause, but even though it is possible that these events have happened, it is only presented as a possibility. (Auster, *Oracle Night* 181-7). He has rewritten his past to work through some of his fears, but he concludes that even if Grace and Trause had an affair when Orr was sick, "as long as Grace wants [him], the past is of no importance." (Auster, *Oracle Night* 187). This rewriting reflects back on Auster himself and could label him as virtuosic reader.

The elements human and reader are not the only part of Auster's author-identity. As is mentioned before, Auster's main characters are almost always writers and the peek into the creative process of those writers is also an indication that Auster portrays a different kind of author. His writers may seem to have all sorts of power over their creations, as I have demonstrated above, but at the same time they struggle with writing as well. The blue notebook in *Oracle Night* seems to live a life of its own, according to Trause and Orr. Trause warns Orr for them by saying that "those notebooks are very friendly, but they can also be cruel, and you have to watch out that you don't get lost in them." (Auster, *Oracle Night* 39). Also, Orr's inability to save one of his characters from a locked room after he himself put him in there

shows that he is not at all in full control. Mr. Blank's retelling of Trause's story has several versions as well: he doesn't get it right the first time, so the reader gets a glimpse of the difficulties that arise when writing a story. These difficulties are a part of the life of a writer. The reader is reminded that texts aren't written at once in all their perfection and the author doesn't look at a first draft and see that it is good: it has to be changed because he gets stuck or it just isn't any good. Auster shows that these texts are indeed the 'efforts of a flesh-and-blood human being.'

A human, embodied author is the image we see portrayed in Auster's fiction; a reader, just like us. Auster is working against Barthes by claiming back the authority of his kind of author; the one that was homogenized with the invisible, realist author-god. At the same time, he is working with him, because Auster embraces the importance of the reader and the 'manuscript as hero.'

Criticism and suggestions for further research

I have stayed within the limits of two theoretical texts that changed the way scholars looked at authorship, but that has as a result that later theories have been excluded from the argument. Burke has demonstrated in his book that Barthes already spoke about the return of the Author. In "From Work to Text," for example, Barthes writes that "it is not that the Author may not 'come back' in the Text, in his text, but he then does so as a 'guest.'" (Barthes, *From Work to Text* 1329-30). The way that I read this, was that before the death of the Author, the Author was the home-owner, but was evicted by Barthes and others. Barthes has adjusted his theory since and admitted that the Author could return, but only as a humble guest: the home belonged to the reader now. If I were to fit Paul Auster into this metaphor, I would say that he has shown that he can be a host, that gladly invites readers into a home that is not necessarily his own, but where he does have some authority, because he has hosted the party in the first place. It would be interesting to work this theory out in relation to Barthes' later work. His essay "The Death of the Author," however, is still challenged by scholars, even though Barthes' ideas about authorship changed somewhat in later years. I have chosen to focus solely on "The Death of the Author" to make the theoretical framework more focused, but thought it should be made explicit that I am aware of the changes in Barthes' own theories. Also, I have not discussed Jacques Derrida's contribution to the discussion for the same reason. The idea of Auster of the 'manuscript as hero' would be great in relation to Derrida's work. It would be interesting, though, to work out the entire theoretical discussion in relation to Auster's work.

Aside from the theoretical limitations, I have demonstrated that Auster and Barthes do have similar ideas about the Author if the Author Barthes was describing was only the realist Author. It should be added, however, that the image of the author Auster creates is of course of his own making. It is his vision of the author that is worked out in his fiction, but that should by no means be the truth. It would take a lengthier work to describe how Auster's view of the author fits into theory and how it relates to other authors who deal with these issues, like Italo Calvino or Jorge Luis Borges. Also, one could also ask what happens when an author decides not to immerse himself into his own texts: is the authority still there when no one is trying to claim it? Researching these theories in relation to Auster's autobiographical works could also be interesting: what happens when the same questions are raised in his non-fiction? Auster himself has related that he deals with the same questions in his non-fiction as in his fiction, but the difference is that the narrative of his own life is already written. The difference between the genres should be interesting to work out. It should also be interesting to look at the relationship between the author and his characters. Auster had trouble representing someone else, as he has mentioned in *The Art of Hunger*. (Auster, *The Art of Hunger* 276). He has let his characters punish him in *Travels in the Scriptorium*, who sued him and tried to find ways to kill him or cared for him because they owed their lives to him. How does this relationship work? How much responsibility does an author have over his characters? One could look at studies of representation to see if the problems there apply for fictionalized people as well.

This thesis has demonstrated that Auster has offered in his fiction an image of the author that works against Barthes' and Foucault's image, but also against the one suggested by Zilcosky. An embodied author is presented, who is first and foremost a reader, but also an authoritative figure when it comes to his fiction. He may not have been the first to announce the return of the author, but he has demonstrated that he is here to stay. We, as readers, have discovered that our author-god is actually human and that is quite the revelation.

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