



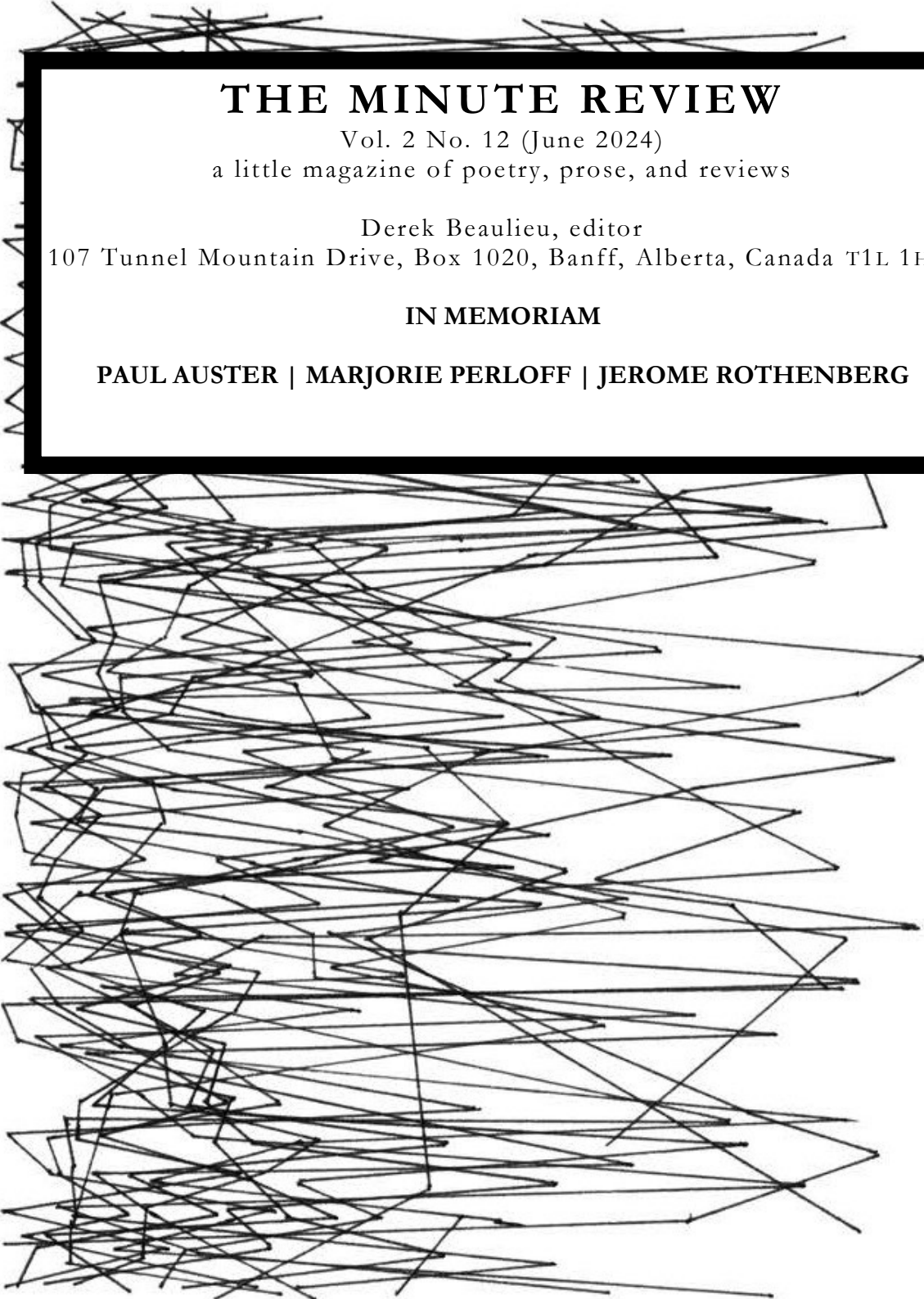
# THE MINUTE REVIEW

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a little magazine of poetry, prose, and reviews

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## IN MEMORIAM

PAUL AUSTER | MARJORIE PERLOFF | JEROME ROTHENBERG



With Contributions by  
Bruce Andrews | Charles Bernstein | José Teodoro |  
Gary Barwin | Jennifer Bartlett | Craig Dworkin | Holly Melgard

Cover by Derek Beaulieu

*Loving Jerry Rothenberg*  
Bruce Andrews

How can he not still be there?  
A shock to many of us—  
when we consider our past, our present, our future  
& no longer being able to share them WITH HIM.

Excuse this small personal anecdotal history:  
starting writing poetry in 1969, completely isolated from any 'live' 'local' poetry 'scene,' swooning over the prewar int'l avant-garde, later anthologized so wonderfully in JR's *Revolution of the Word*, & caught up in looking around for the most radical possibilities in the post-'New American Poetry' of the 1960s (with JR's early work & Ashbery's *Tennis Court Oath* & Eigner & a few others signaling what could move us into a fresh new future, especially one on the level with what was excitingly happening in so many other art fields [remember: I was an International Relations major with no (in retrospect, helpful) school exposure to more conservative/mainstream poetry]). Jerry's anthologies blew me away. I knew zero poets in person, my entire 'publishing' activity was 'in the mail' (that forgotten world of activity). Submitting some poems in 1971 to his terrific journal, *Alcheringa*—back when having an address was the key to accessing the world of contemporary poetry without any personal 'interface' [lovely interchanges with publishers at the time like Jonathan Williams & Dick Higgins, for example, would be so energizing]—& I get a lovely, encouraging letter back from Jerry, saying the journal was basically devoted to ethnographic work. BUT—he mentioned that there was a young poet in the SF Bay area who'd started a magazine, *Totter's*—Ron Silliman, & he thought we should be in touch. [Ron is a few years older than me & Jerry a few years after this also introduced Ron to Charles Bernstein, such an amazing 'connector' & a crucial part of our shared history]. Anyway, my work & Ron's (bouncing off of Grenier & Coolidge) 'hit it off' & that began the beginning of a correspondence in 1971, the beginnings of what got titled 'Language Centered Writing' (at the end of 1971), in our letters. The rest is 'our little history'. Years later, meeting & becoming (what seemed liked) almost family, was such a wonderful oasis in my life. This is what love & friendship & devotion feels like. If the way we live, in the so-called poetry world, can manage to honor this heritage & this long history of attention/devotion/responsiveness/care—we will be so indebted to Jerry. Miss you! ~

Unluckily, I never got to meet Jerome Rothenberg in person before he passed to thank him for making *TaS*, an object in my life as dear to me as any first teacher has been. So instead, to honor his memory, I submit this plea to the friend who stole my copy of it:

You know who you are. If you return my copy of *Technicians of the Sacred* that you stole, I promise to not judge or punish you. It means too much to me to part with. Please bring it back!

***Missing Copy of Jerome Rothenberg's Technicians of the Sacred:  
Please Return***  
**Holly Melgard**

When I sat down to write this commemoration of Jerome Rothenberg, I was devastated to find that one of my poet-friends (I've narrowed it down to five possible thieves) stole my copy of my favorite anthology that he edited, *Technicians of the Sacred*. Someone must have borrowed and kept it, because I would never knowingly let it go. I don't blame whoever took it—boundary crossing is a reasonable reaction to a book this marvelous.

*Technicians of the Sacred* (ToS) is a 636-page anthology that surveys poetry and ritual from various indigenous cultures around the world. This radical collection, originally published in 1968 and revised several times since, presents a diverse range of poems including songs, stories, soundscapes, and event scores belonging to societies across different continents and historical periods. Rothenberg's anthology showcases a seemingly universal human impulse towards ritual expression and spiritual communication, highlighting the richness and multiplicity of poetic form in a global context.

Reading it for the first time as a grad student in Dennis Tedlock's seminar at the SUNY Buffalo Poetics Program changed my brain. (With Rothenberg, Tedlock co-founded the ethnopoeitic method, which is the practice of documenting verbal art using poetic line rather than sentences in order to notate more performative nuance than anthropological prose tradition could otherwise capture.) *ToS* highlighted aspects of communication that were so far beyond my narrow, western, colonial understanding of language—what Tedlock used to call “the lettered word”—that it expanded my consciousness of poetic possibility tenfold: An event poem where designated spots in the room are as intrinsic to the text as its words; ancient Incan quipu literature written in a language of knot tying; poem as trance, as spell, as incantation, as womb, as journey. These were immersive texts defiantly published during a period when the western literary world, mired in xenophobia, was largely hostile to styles not squarely aimed at the post-war mission to provoke alienation and critical distance.

In the best possible way, this book shook up everything I thought I knew about the stuff we call language. It taught me to always aim to document in my poems the material state of my language and my literacy in my contemporary moment, however multi-modal that may become in my digital lifetime. It did this by showing me that language is a living thing that is ever changing and constituted by far more than what the lettered word alone would lead us to believe.

***Remembering Paul Auster***  
**Charles Bernstein**

Paul Auster loved Philippe Petit, who, in 1974, glided between the Twin Towers on a tightrope. Paul was no daredevil and maybe Petit wasn't either. Both defied expectations in the pursuit of possibility. Risk vanished into sublimity.

Paul wrote his way across impasses that have tripped up the best. His twin towers included coincidence and make-believe, Newark and Brooklyn, catastrophe and happiness, biography and essay, the quotidian and the miraculous, French and English, frames and mirrors, son and father, chance and consequence, story and song.

Paul was a lover and a loner: a figure of imagination in everyday life and a real figure in fiction and poems.

He excelled not only at the art of writing, translating, making anthologies and filmmaking, but also at the art of living, including the art of friendship. I first met Paul in 1979. For the past decade, we lived within walking distance of each other. I saw him last a couple of weeks before he died. He told me the story of the day he met Siri Hustvedt.

Auster's work shimmers at the edges with audacious grace and uncanny soulfulness.

He is a high-wire artist of language.

I love watching him walk the line.

***A Conversation with Paul Auster***  
**José Teodoro**

I learned of Paul Auster's death, at 77, from lung cancer, late one night while working on a book project as part of the Form and Constraint literary residency at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. I had been thinking and talking of Auster, his voice, his paragraphs, his presence, in the days preceding. News of his death struck me in a curious manner. I felt puzzled, as though, in some mysterious way, this particular death made the phenomenon of death new to me again. Auster wrote several stories that concerned disappearances: now Auster has disappeared. He began his writing life as a poet and translator. He was the author of many books, among them, *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), *The New York Trilogy* (1985-86), *The Music of Chance* (1990), *Oracle Night* (2003), *Winter Journal* (2012), and *Man in the Dark* (2008), the focus of the below conversation. I travelled to Brooklyn in the summer of 2008 to speak with him in his home. He was an Austerian character: articulate and engaged, humble and full of wonder, warm yet somehow also distant, often peering into a vacant corner as we spoke. He smoked many tiny cigars. He was exceedingly handsome and photogenic, yet he asked me to keep him company, to keep him distracted, while photographer Mark Mahaney staged a number of portraits. We had a pair of phone calls regarding the interview in the weeks that followed. I'm so glad I was still using an answering machine at the time. A tiny cassette tape holding his salutations lives in a drawer under my desk. This interview originally appeared in slightly different form in *Stop Smiling* No. 38 in 2009.

**José Teodoro:** The beginning of *Man in the Dark* reminded me of the first line of your poem 'Disappearances': "Out of solitude, he begins again." August's "little story to keep the ghosts away" made me consider the primacy of being alone in the dark and its role as catalyst for creative acts.

**Paul Auster:** Some people tell stories out loud. Some people write books in cafés, surrounded by crowds of people. But essentially when you're writing you're alone. I myself have never been able to write in public. I always have to be locked up in a room somewhere. So in some sense this idea of a man in a room is for me an emblem of the man or woman thinking and telling a story.

**JT:** With parenting having played a significant role in your work, August's nocturnal storytelling, both to himself and his daughter, also made me think about storytelling as a vital channel between parent and child. Did you make up stories for your kids?

**PA:** I think all parents do that. I always have the feeling, strangely enough, that when I stopped writing poetry back in the late 70s and made the shift to writing prose, a lot of it had to do with becoming a father. I think storytelling is something that unfolds over time, as opposed to say, lyric poetry. And time is what the relationship between parents and children is all about. When you have a child it brings you face to face with your own mortality in a way that is very invigorating, because you know that there's another generation that's going to replace you. I believe these kinds of thoughts engender stories.

aware of all the reasons one might not finish that chapter as expected; she thought ahead, sympathetically and individually to how many ways life was not easy: the cruel difficulties of the world; the real hardships people faced; the obstacles and impediments that got in one's way. But she never took those as excuses. And this is the lesson I learned: that exigencies are not excuses.

It's a lesson I've needed more than ever these last few months, when everything has been truly difficult for me without her around; and so it is one of the many lessons I'll be carrying forward.

***Being Marjorie Perloff's student***  
**Craig Dworkin**

A whole generation of scholars knows first-hand how easy it was to be Marjorie's student. Advantages and benefits accrued from the continued, exceptionally active advocacy she gifted her protégés. For the two volumes of collected book reviews published, for what must be two volumes worth of collected interviews, there are surely twenty volumes of recommendation letters on a hard drive somewhere. Personally, it feels good to acknowledge that any and every professional success I have had in academia—from my first article to my current book—is directly thanks to Marjorie.

But you might not have considered how hard it was to be Marjorie's student, or how difficult it could be to work as her colleague.

Let me offer just one example (although I can distinctly remember this very thing happening more than once over the decades): I am pedaling uphill against the inbox, and after several polite reminders Marjorie has written again to say that she really would like to see the draft of the chapter I was working on. I finally send it off, with no small sense of relief and a little bit of triumph, and go to reward myself by making some tea. Coming back to the computer after a few minutes to face down even more delinquent but less pressing emails, I find that Marjorie has already written back—two pages to my two lines—and has already read my chapter. She's made smart, helpful, insightful comments, corrected the accents on the French quotations (ahem), and pointed out that in a footnote I cite a page number that she remembers being different and thinks must be wrong (what a photographic memory!).

But she can't check now, because she's on the plane to give a keynote, which she needs to finish writing, though first she wants to tell me about the dinner party she hosted the night before (lots of good gossip!), and the symphony concert she heard the night before that (Gustavo Dudamel, almost as energetic as she is), and complain about the "old women in the airport" slowing her down (this when she was in her 80s herself).

On top of which, she has attached the drafts of *two* essays she has been working on. Marjorie could write faster than I can read. Indeed, I realize that in the time it has taken me to read her email she has written a half dozen others, just as thorough, just as perceptive, just as personal, just as smart, just as fun.

None of which is a surprise to those who knew her. Marjorie was a force of nature; she was ridiculously productive and prolific, and a preternatural essayist—all while leading a fully social and devotedly familial and richly cultural life (not to mention daily doses, for decades, of *The Young and the Restless*).

But I recall this moment because it is the kernel of one of the many lessons I learned from Marjorie. Which is not that one could aspire to do what she did, with such élan. To be Marjorie's student and let her set the bar for what one was meant to achieve would pave the road to a career of disappointment and misery. In fact, Marjorie was always

**JT:** In *The Invention of Solitude* you write extensively about your relationship with your father, who's evoked as an almost supernaturally distant man. But he told you stories, didn't he?

**PA:** Every once in a while he would. They were far-fetched, extravagant adventure tales, and he himself was always the protagonist. I was so small and gullible that I believed him. Stories about prospecting for gold in South America, sliding down mountains and fighting off bandits, taking care of his donkey. They were very vivid and I think in some way when he took the time to tell me these stories I felt closer to him than in any other moment in my life as his son.

**JT:** It's nothing to note that your novels frequently feature writers for protagonists, but what I think is really interesting is the fact that, in a more general way, you seem compelled to draw out the storytelling capacity in all kinds of people, something particularly evident in the NPR story project that resulted in *I Thought My Father Was God*. Even in *Man in the Dark*, when August is with Katya he's telling stories about his life or, toward the end, even suggesting they write movies together.

**PA:** I believe we're all telling stories to one another all the time. Even at the most rudimentary level jokes are stories, and people love to tell jokes. Gossip is of course a form of storytelling, and people are always hungry to hear the latest dirt on people they know, or even people they don't. We still exist in an oral culture. I think we forget that because we're so bombarded with electronic media. People still talk, and when they talk they tell stories. It's a natural function of conversation and being human.

**JT:** I must confess that, the more we interact via technology that encourages us not to be articulate in our writing, the more I worry that our ability to tell stories out loud also suffers.

**PA:** It's possible. But I think it's more complicated than that. When I was young I had various jobs, most of them blue collar jobs. I never wanted to work in an office. So most of the time—and this is particularly true of my time as a merchant seaman on an oil tanker, back in 1970 when I was 23 years old—I was with people who did not have higher educations. Most hadn't even finished high school. But I discovered, much to my shame, that they could talk circles around me. So quick, so alert, so witty, so inventive. While I, who had my nose in books all the time, was tongue-tied next to them. I was very impressed with their abilities. I'm not saying that the language they used was the most ornate or sophisticated, but they knew how to tell stories. So I wouldn't underestimate people who don't read a lot. On the other hand, yes, there are big problems in education today and children aren't writing very well. You compare an ordinary educated person of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with an ordinary educated person of today and the difference is astounding. You read letter from the Civil War, for example, not by artists or scholars but just soldiers writing home, and some of it is very eloquent and moving.

**JT:** The mere mention of Iraq, torture, President Bush, the erosion of civil liberties, and the notion of a new civil war in America is, of course, more than enough reason for people to want to comb *Man in the Dark* for political commentary. But it seems like

August's storytelling is itself a sort of political statement, a way of saying that the imagination cannot be so easily corrupted, controlled, confined or colonized. Do you see the storytelling impulse as a form of political action?

**PA:** To tell you the truth I wasn't thinking about that. But now that you mention it, I'm pleased that you had that response. In some sense everything is political, and it doesn't necessarily mean you're addressing political questions directly. But if we believe in the idea of democracy that means that we believe in the worth and dignity of the individual—and that means everybody. It means acknowledging that everybody has an inner life that's just as rich and active as mine is and yours is. And essentially what novel writing is is telling the stories of people. People with inner lives. So in some sense one can say that writing is a political act. Even if you're writing about tea parties on Fifth Avenue, it's still about the inner lives of human beings. For readers and people who care about books I think this has a great effect on them. I think an earnest reader of fiction will feel closer to his fellow human beings because of the experience he has of living inside other people.

**JT:** I guess these days it's inevitable that with any significant American author we're going to be sniffing out political subtext in everything they put out. Were you conscious of that while writing this book?

**PA:** Well it's there, it's obvious. You mention the words, the names, and it's all true. I think there is a strong political component to this book. And I think it was generated by the 2000 election, which for me was one of the great scandals of American history. We watched Al Gore get elected President and then we watched it get taken away from him through legal and political manoeuvring in an outrageous Supreme Court decision, which was in some sense a legal coup. And I've lived these past seven and a half years with this eerie sense that we're not in the real world anymore, but a parallel one. This wasn't supposed to happen. Bush wasn't supposed to be President, there wasn't supposed to be a war in Iraq—there might not have even been a 9/11 if Gore had been elected. So I think this sense of disconnect is what inspired the story within the story, the one that Brill invents for himself.

**JT:** Don DeLillo once said that it is the writer's job to be against the establishment, to take a stand against the government.

**PA:** I agree with Don. If you remember the epigraph for *Leviathan*, it was from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Every actual state is corrupt." I believe this. Some states are worse than others, but the fact that there's always room for improvement should keep us on our toes. We have to be alert to the hypocrisies and contradictions and corruptions in our society. Everyone should. But I think a writer has the duty to do that. Temperamentally, too, writers tend to be outsiders. I think part of the reason we become writers is because we don't feel we fit in anywhere. And by standing in the margins you have a clearer view of things than people who are immersed in the system. Another way of putting it is the extraordinary line by Marina Tsvetaeva, the Russian poet, who said in one of her poems, "In this most Christian of worlds, all

mother hit it with a newspaper. I told him that I bought a book for him to sign, and asked him to guess what it was. It was an anthropological book on cannibals that he translated from French. I loved this strange book, and translated it into poems, since lost, and no one has heard of it, but Auster took it in stride.

Not soon after this meeting, I turned to reading *Summer Without Men*, and learned that Siri Hustvedt was just as a damn good novelist, if not better, than her husband, *The Blazing World* is one of my favorite books. Ever. My father told me that Auster and Hustvedt were not like other people, they were geniuses. This is true, but they are also not like other people because they are kind.

I met Auster one other time at the Bee-Bernstein's house. My husband could not pull me away; I think he left without me. I am not a bragger nor star-f-er. I try to stay silent, but to me Auster wasn't just a star, his writing was always with me, rolling around in my mind. The last interaction I had with the household was when I read *4321*, another masterpiece, and my friend George Hart and I were giving a talk on Larry Eigner at NYU. I bravely picked up the handwritten postcard that I saved and dialed the number on it, for only the second time, and after clarifying that I wasn't the "other Jennifer Bartlett—the painter—" I invited them to the reading, but they could not come because, she explained, "my husband lost the Booker Prize and is on a plane in a bad mood." He should have won all the prizes.

The day after Auster died, I found out by opening the *NY Times* when I woke up in a hotel in Aukreyri, Iceland, on the lamb between residencies. I called Charles, then I called my dad and Anne. My Dad and Anne could not hear me because of bad reception, so I emailed them. My dad answered: *Paul lived a useful and creative life*. This made me hope and wonder if, after all my activism, and breakups and breakdowns, and jobs, and days spent doing not much in the Arctic if I was having a useful life. The jury is still out on that one.

***My Paul Auster***  
**Jennifer Bartlett**

My story about Paul Auster begins with my father and my ex-husband. On my father's only visit to NYC, we were walking behind the large NYU apartment buildings, and my father, a well-known critic, poet, professor, and thinker said, "There goes Paul Auster." I don't know if it was actually Paul Auster who passed us, and I didn't know who Paul Auster was, just that he was a great writer in my father's eyes, and that was enough.

Years later, my husband was reading the *New York Trilogy*, and I told him in a snotty tone, "I don't read 'popular' novelists." This, of course, was a stupid thing to say, not only was Auster not a "popular novelist," but in the past years, I have grown to love Emma Straub, Jennifer Weiner, and Elizabeth Strout, not to mention Iceland's most famous (and sometimes bad) mystery writer, Arnaldur Indriðason. I was a novelist snob who read Murakami, Bowles (both of them), Baldwin, and the classics. However, some how I "fell" into my husband's copy of the *New York Trilogy*. It was a book I hated but was also compelled by.

As aside, in one of my many experiences with people being ableist, I left the book at a bar in my now-gentrified neighborhood of Greenpoint Brooklyn where I thought they liked me. When I called about leaving my book behind, the bartender said, "Hey, that girl with MS is on the phone." I don't have MS, I have cerebral palsy, and I wanted to be thought of as the cool girl the cool girl reading Paul Auster, I digress. Within 24 hours, I had bought a NEW copy of the book, the book I hated, the popular novelist and so it goes.

When I find a novelist I love, I read everything they write. This is a habit I picked up in elementary school reading all of Judy Blume [for those who care, Sally J. Freeman as Herself was my favorite]. I haven't read everything Auster wrote, but most of it. I don't know how I changed from hating that first book, which is unlike the others, to whipping through the novels. I can hardly remember specifics, there are so many, and so many cross-overs. I think my favorites are *Oracle Night* and *Sunset Park*.

I met Auster three times through my friend, mentor, and general person I love, Charles Bernstein. The first time was at Bernstein's 60th birthday party at took place at Mimi Gross's loft. You would think God walked in the room. Paul was already pretty tipsy, and we didn't speak much.

Later, I was writing a biography on the poet Larry Eigner, and found out that Auster had correspondence with Eigner at the New York Public Library. He wanted to publish Eigner in the magazine *Living Hand* he edited with Lydia Davis. After finding these [uncatalogued] letters, I talked Bernstein into getting me in touch with Auster. In order to reach Auster, you had to write a letter [i.e. in the mail with a stamp] and wait for return postcard with a landline number. Paul was busy, and he didn't make it easy. I made an appointment and enlisted my "intern" Eric Rydin because I was too nervous to go myself. Eric and I met at the local Barnes and Nobles bookstore in Cobble Hill, and I was shaking as we rang the doorbell. It was a beautiful house, and we got to sit in the study with Auster who noted that we were interrupting a baseball game. I apologized profusely.

Auster was kind and generous with his time. The one story I remember him about when he visited Eigner in Swampscott was that his father had a fly on his nose and the

poets are Jews." Now, she wasn't Jewish. She was making a political statement, an aesthetic statement, about the role of the writer and the poet in relation to society, because if we're not going to look at it closely who else is going to?

**JT:** Do you feel that writers and poets still have significant influence on public discourse in their respective societies?

**PA:** In America writers have no power at all. It's a moment in which we are in abeyance, perhaps forgotten forever as the great tide of history sweeps us away. It's amazing how in other countries that's not the case. In Europe or South America, there is still some interest in what writers have to say about things. But in the United States, I can't think of anyone. Gore Vidal is sounding off a lot, but he doesn't influence anybody. Norman Mailer spoke out a lot but whether he had any effect on anyone I don't really think so. We have a culture of such deep anti-intellectualism that the majority of people mistrust intellectuals. The ridiculous arguments that have been going on during the current presidential campaign about Obama being an elitist because he's articulate and has read books and even written books, and went to good colleges and universities, is absurd and frightening. George Bush went to Yale, after all. He comes from a family of immense privilege and wealth. Why does he get to be the good ol' boy? And poor Obama, who grew up broke, struggling, with a broken family, is a labelled an elitist. I mean, the world is upside down when you get to this point.

**JT:** So I guess it's safe to say that your frustration with your country and its current role in the world was one of the key instigating forces for this novel?

**PA:** It's something that's been brewing inside me for a long time. And then there's the terrible story of David Grossman's son. As you may have noted, the book is dedicated to David and his family. And to Uri, who was killed in 2006 during the brief war with Lebanon. David's a very close friend, a man I admire tremendously as a writer and as a human being. His loss has been absolutely intolerable. He's the only man I know who's lost a child to a war, and so his story was very much burning in my mind as I wrote the book, too.

**JT:** *Man in the Dark* has this narrative structure that catches you off guard, with the story within the story, this story about a man who must kill the person who created him, seeming to dominate until about two-thirds of the way through, when it suddenly disappears in a flash of violence. But I wonder if you don't find something pleasurable in the idea of aborted stories. I'm thinking too of the story within the story in *Oracle Night*, where the author paints himself into a corner he can't get out of.

**PA:** August doesn't paint himself into a corner. He just realizes that there's nothing more to be done with this story. The way it's unfolding, the confrontation between Brick and Brill is impossible, so he has to put an end to it. And then, it's true, the book takes a sharp turn. I knew in my bones it was the right thing to do. You shift from all the things that have been going on in Brill's head to Katya's entrance, and then their long conversation about Brill's marriage to Katya's grandmother is a very

intimate business, very personal. And yet, this is Brill's life. He's got his imagination firing away, and he's also got this daughter and granddaughter, and his memories, and it's all part of one big whole. I think, too, that the films that he and Katya discuss early in the book also are about intimate situations, and somehow this notion of family is already coming to life as they discuss the films. Brill even pauses at one moment to consider a film they haven't yet discussed, *Tokyo Story*, the quintessential film about families. And then, too, there's the story of Brill's sister and the Newark riots, and that's the moment where family, war and politics all come together. I took that story from real experience. The character who is Brill's sister is actually my mother and my stepfather was the Gil character. I mean, I altered things, but essentially what happened was that night in July, 1967, my mother and stepfather took me out to dinner in New York. I was 20 years old. We got into the car, and my stepfather was about to drive me back to my apartment when the squawking sounds came through the radio about the disturbances in Newark. We drove straight into Newark, we didn't go to my place. We drove straight to City Hall, and I saw Hugh Addonizio, the mayor, praying at his desk. What happened then is just as I tell it in the book. You can't make up this stuff. You had to have been there.

**JT:** Would you say that the promise of a story is sometimes more interesting than the actual following through? I think about Borges, his method of alluding to infinite story possibilities and those possibilities themselves being a completely independent source of marvel.

**PA:** No, I'm interested in following them. That's what I live for, the actual doing of it, not just thinking about it. But with regard to the unconventional structure, well, I don't want to write conventional books. My mind doesn't work in conventional patterns. I have to follow my nose. Or as one friend once put it, a poet friend: "When they're expecting oranges, give them apples."

**JT:** I want to ask you about this strange relationship between *Man in the Dark* and its immediate predecessor *Travels in the Scriptorium*. They're very different from each other yet both feature this notion of someone literally writing the world into being. Is this an idea you're deliberately trying to explore through a variety of different angles?

**PA:** I think of these two books as a diptych. As you said they don't really resemble each other, but they have a lot of similarities. Both take place in a limited space—a room—and in a limited period of time. In *Travels* it's one day, in *Man in the Dark* one night. Both of the protagonists are old. And I think the second book really was an answer to the first, in my own mind at least.

**JT:** How consciously do your novels function as explorations of certain themes or ideas that concern you?

**PA:** I've never sat down and said to myself that I want to write a book *about* something. I don't look for ideas—they find me. It's usually something bubbling up out of my unconscious. I can't really track the origins. I've never even been able to witness myself having an idea, pinpoint that moment or see the synapse in the brain when this

## ***Somewhere in Lithuania, my Jewish Ancestors Consider the Modern World***

**Gary Barwin**

My great-grandparents, my great-uncles and aunts, my many cousins woke up in their graves and dug their way to the surface. It had been so long that even their bullet holes had disappeared. They looked around the green earth—blossoms, unfurling leaves, birds.

They looked at the poets.

—After what happened to us, surely writing poetry is impossible now?

—No, poetry continues because of poetry.

They looked at the soldiers.

—Then at least killing is impossible?

—No, killing continues because of killing.

—And fear?

Something like love or sorrow passed over their missing faces.



**JT:** Are you personally happy with the body of work, with whatever thread you see running through it, when you take a step back and look at it?

**PA:** Strangely enough, I don't step back. I don't think about the past very much. I'm just concerned with what I'm trying to do now. Another novelist friend of mine, one older than I am and who's written many books, he and I were talking about just this question not so long ago. He told me, "I tend to think of the books I've written as bundles I've left behind on the road, and I'm just walking forward, I'm not going back to pick them up." I thought that was a very good answer.

**JT:** It's interesting however to examine the way certain artists, of whatever discipline, will be able to speak articulately about their work in spite of themselves and the ineffable nature of their process. On one hand they might declare the work to be the product of pure instinct, yet some artists can comment on their work with such insight. Though I suppose that's largely an act of hindsight.

**PA:** Yes, exactly. You don't really know why you're doing it and you don't know what it means. Siri right now has just finished writing a piece on Gerhard Richter, the German painter, for a show that's coming up. And she quoted to me just the other day Richter's comments to Rob Storr, the curator of the retrospective at MoMA. He said essentially that: "I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what any of it means. And if you want to discuss it with me now, it's as if I'm going into a psychiatrist's office and trying to figure out my past and my motives for doing what I did, and I'm not really very interested in doing that." I feel the same way.

**JT:** By his own account, many years ago David Lynch attended his first and only psychotherapy session, and he asked the therapist, "Do you think that our discussions here could have any damaging effect on my creativity?" And the therapist said, "Sure, that's possible." And Lynch immediately stood up, shook the therapist's hand and left.

[Both laugh.]

thing is taking place. Nothing particularly interesting is happening, and suddenly, from one moment to the next, there's a thought in your head, an idea for a story. If this material keeps surging up and compelling me to pay attention to it, then I begin to get interested. It's more a matter of opening your mind than forcing anything, and it's a proper state of openness that I think allows this material to come floating in. And then I have to start organizing it. And in every case the book I have in my head when I start writing it is different than the book I finish. Many things happen in between. Every day you discover something new.

**JT:** Is it safe to assume you don't create outlines or take a lot of notes before you start?

**PA:** Very little. I sometimes will jot down chronologies. The order of information is very important in writing a novel. I don't write in chunks or jump around in the story. I write from the first word to the last. Each sentence is somehow dependent on the sentences that preceded it. So an outline could be for me: Brill in his room; Brick in the hall; then a break; talks to Katya, et cetera. I have an idea of those passages in my head, but it's not until I sit down and write them that they become embodied.

**JT:** What do you generally find are the things you absolutely need to get started? Do you need an image? A title?

**PA:** I usually need a title. A couple of times I've changed titles, but I seem to need one in order to begin. The title somehow organizes my thoughts for me, keeps my feet on the ground. That's crucial. And sometimes, just for fun, I make up titles for books I'll never write. I have whole lists of them sitting around in various notebooks.

**JT:** What about form? Does the possibility of working within a particular formal framework motivate you?

**PA:** No. For me, if you want to use the old dichotomy, content always determines the form. The thing that you want to say is going to establish the form in which you're going to say it. It's not the other way around. I'm not writing sonnets.

**JT:** Do forms or structures from other disciplines ever influence you?

**PA:** Music very much does, though I'm hard pressed to say exactly how. I'm very interested in the rhythms, the cadences, the sounds of the sentences. Even if they look simple, they're not, because I believe that a reader, an attentive reader, reads as much with his body as with his brain, and that, at least subliminally, these rhythms are effecting the way you're perceiving the story. So I pay a lot of attention to that. I'm very interested in varying rhythms and tempos. For example, you can have a ten-page passage that can talk about something that happens over the course of one or two minutes, and then you can jump ahead to ten years later. Those shifts can be very exhilarating.

**JT:** Thinking about form, you’ve written eloquently about the events connected to your move from poetry to novels and I wonder if at this point in your life you could ever imagine another such shift.

**PA:** I don’t know if it will happen, but I can certainly imagine it. I don’t know what’s going to happen to me from one day to the next. I’m working on another novel now, going very slowly, pushing my way through. It’s a very difficult book to write. I’m treading on very dangerous ground, I think. It’s already longer than *Man in the Dark*, and I still have a ways to go. And after this I don’t have any burning ideas, so who knows?

**JT:** One of the most pleasurable parts of *Man in the Dark* for me was August and Katya’s little studies of films, especially the focus on objects. Like in *Book of Illusions*, I felt you did some marvelous things by simply describing cinematic sequences, whether real or fictional, in your own prose style. I know you’ve written book reviews but have you ever written about film?

**PA:** A little, never professionally. When I was in college I wrote for the *Columbia Spectator*, the undergraduate newspaper, and I reviewed films for them occasionally. The first prose I ever published, interestingly enough, was a long piece on Godard’s *Weekend* for the *Spectator*. That must have been 1968. I remember my argument because I thought about it so long and hard. I was very interested in Surrealism then, and when I looked at Godard’s film I thought he’d invented a new form, a sort of public Surrealism. The old Surrealism of the 20s and 30s was about the individual, about dreams, tapping the unconscious as a source of beauty. What I thought Godard did that was very interesting was he expanded it all. The weekend, if you look at it as a unit of time, from Friday afternoon to Sunday night, is approximately one third of the week, which is about the same percentage of our lives we spend sleeping. So I proposed that the weekend is the dreamtime of our post-industrial society, and then I just spun it out from there. It was a great deal of fun.

**JT:** While books like *The Invention of Solitude* and *Hand to Mouth* function as explicit memoir, characters with whom you share many distinctive traits or who seem like overt stand-ins pop up frequently in your work. I’m curious if you have a particular philosophy about this, or under what conditions it makes sense to you to write some version of yourself into a story.

**PA:** I tend not to think of this as true. Because I have written nonfiction and autobiographical work I don’t feel much of a desire to sneak a lot of biographical material into my novels. Though it does happen, as it did with the Newark riots. In the case of *Leviathan* it’s a wink, but that wink is really to Siri and her first novel. I made a trans-fictional marriage between my character Peter Aaron and Iris, the protagonist of *The Blindfold*. And of course Siri actually appears in *City of Glass*, as do I for that matter. And then there are things that I’ve used now and again for reasons that always had to do with the story I was writing and not because I particularly wanted to tell that autobiographical incident. In *The Locked Room* for example, the story about the census taking job was something I really did. And Fanshawe’s experiences on the ship are

similar to mine. And of course the rather touching story about the old Russian composer in *The Locked Room* was taken directly from real life. So yes, I have done these sorts of things, but not as often as you’d think.

**JT:** I guess I can’t help but wonder if you see the varied levels of autobiographical content as being a way of trying to get closer to some sort of self-knowledge. It certainly seems like your work has often been concerned with trying to piece together portraits from fragments of a life—that’s pretty much the thrust of *Leviathan*, I think, this sort of biographical archeology.

**PA:** I know that I do learn more about myself in the act of writing, the act of digging. There are times when it’s very painful, writing about things that make you depressed or angry, that make you scared. But you have to keep going down there. It can be exhausting, emotionally, but I think that’s why you do it. You can’t write a novel without giving 100% of yourself. My only justification for doing what I do in this world of many books is that writing is a job that demands everything from you, something not true of most jobs. And everyday after I’ve finished work, even if I’ve accomplished nothing, even if I’ve crossed out every sentence I’ve written, I can stand up from my desk and say that I gave everything I had today, poured my whole self into trying to unearth the truth about whatever it is I’m trying to talk about. And there’s some satisfaction in that, just the effort, the fact that you’re trying as hard as you can.

**JT:** How do you feel about the experiences life gives you to draw upon now that you’re in your 60s? You seem like a pretty healthy guy, but you’ve got an awful lot of ailing older men in your work over the last several years.

**PA:** [Laughs] Well, I’m of a certain age already. Things start to break down. It’s surprising how suddenly it happens. Wait until you turn 50. It’s not shocking, just simply curious how you just can’t do the things you used to do. I don’t know, maybe I’m preparing myself for old age. Or the end. I can’t really say. These are the things that have been coming to me, so I go with it. But the book I’m writing now is essentially set in 1967 and the characters are mostly young. It’s interesting to try to get into the mind of a 20-year-old again.

**JT:** This is admittedly a very corny question, but do you ever give any thought to your legacy? The literati of late have been a bit hostile to, well, some of the best, certainly some of the most adventurous established writers in this country. Are you at a point in your life where you concern yourself with how your body of work has been received? Do you feel good about it? Do you ever feel frustrated?

**PA:** I don’t have any complaints, I have to tell you, none whatsoever. No one asked me to do this. I did it because I chose to, so I don’t really expect anything. All I can say is that all my books are in print in the United States, and that’s a lot of books now. They put me into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, whatever that means. It’s some acknowledgement that I’ve been around for a while and what I’ve done is not so terrible. I’m able to earn a living from what I do. And I still want to do it. So why should I complain?