

学校编码: 10384

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厦 门 大 学

博 士 学 位 论 文

Paul Auster's Quests:

Finding One's Place in the Darkness

保罗·奥斯特的追寻：在黑暗中寻找自己的位置

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论文提交日期: 2009 年 4 月

论文答辩时间: 2009 年 7 月

学位授予日期: 2009 年 月

答辩委员会主席: _____

评 阅 人: _____

2009 年 7 月

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Ph.D. Dissertation

**Paul Auster's Quests: Finding One's Place
in the Darkness**

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June 2009

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Abstract

Paul Auster (1947-) is the contemporary American writer of eighteen novels, three memoirs, a volume of selected poems, a collection of critical essays, and four screenplays. Before the publication of *The New York Trilogy*, he was known primarily for having edited the *Random House Anthology of Twentieth-Century French Poetry* and for having written several insightful literary essays. In the short period of time since the publication of the *Trilogy*, Auster has attracted international attention and been elevated to celebrity status. His criticism has witnessed an exponential growth since 1995. Frequently compared to authors ranging from Nathaniel Hawthorne, Samuel Beckett to Alain Robbe-Grillet, Auster is now acclaimed one of America's most praised contemporary novelists. And his work is hailed by many French critics as one of the great revelations of American literature in recent years.

Despite this success, the American critic Sven Birkerts has a point when he describes Auster as "the ghost at the banquet of contemporary American letters" (Birkerts, 1992: 338). Auster has synthesized postmodernist literary devices, existentialist theories and a fluid, readable writing style in his work. The philosophical dimension of his writing, as well as his abiding interest in understanding the whole complex fabric of existence, invests his work with an intellectual depth lacking in much contemporary American fiction. His fictional world is governed by chance and absurdity. The foregrounding of the chance element plays an important role in his definition of realism which contends that life is literally meaningless. There is no truth, but one runs after it all the same. It is this paradox, the twin impulses of looking for meaning and accepting the meaningless of the world, that Auster explores in his fiction. This attempt makes his characters restless inquisitors who undertake solitary journeys across the vastness of America in pursuit of ends of which even they themselves are unaware. If those characters are not traveling outwards, they are bound to take the journey within, seeking the means by which they can be alive in the fullest sense. Entangled in a textual universe that is itself an effect of incessantly gliding signifiers, the fate of those characters becomes a question of whether they can adapt to that situation in the process of their quest for meaning. And it is the ability to embrace the

meaningless as the first principle, the ability to go on when they can't go on, that ultimately decides over the success or failure of Auster's subjects.

Although recent years see Auster's fame on the rise in China and seven of his novels have been translated into Chinese, there is not much academic concern accompanying his popularity. The lack of critical enthusiasm somewhat hinders the Chinese reader from getting a comprehensive understanding of this author. The dissertation offers some possible explanations for many questions raised in Auster's fiction, but it does not try to decide them once for all. Instead, it serves as groundwork for understanding Auster, especially to the Chinese reader, and it invites further discussion in Chinese academic field.

The focus of this dissertation is on the major themes of Auster's fiction. Throughout his work Auster is preoccupied with certain recurrent set of themes and issues, such as the isolation of the individual, the mystery of the self, the inadequacy of language, the impossibility of knowledge, and the overwhelming lack of cognitive certainty associated with the contemporary Western life. Those themes and issues constitute Auster's persistent quest for the meaning of existence. Accordingly, quest is the master-narrative of this dissertation. It is defined as thematic narrative which represents the struggle of the individual for the attainment of some understanding. This understanding consists not only of making assertions about the world, but of the interpretation of one's place in the world.

In light of the remarkable diversity concerning the themes and genres Auster works with, it is necessary to take a dialectical method to interpret Auster's fiction, which combines historical, philosophical, theoretical study together with textual analysis. This dissertation covers eight of Auster's novels which are considered by many critics as his canon. Auster's themes and writing strategies evoke the postmodernist and existentialist theories, which will serve as the interpretive tools of this dissertation. But those theories are not referred to systematically; instead, some concepts are chosen when they converge with Auster's poetics. In addition, some philosophical and literary ideas are employed on the suggestion of Auster's fiction, such as Foucault's notion of power relations, the concept of redemption and rebirth in Judaism, and the Marxist discussion of freedom. Those ideas also provide a fruitful background for the reading of Auster's themes.

The dissertation consists of an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion. The introduction gives a general account of Auster's life and career, the historical and cultural context of his work, the philosophical and literary influences on him, and his popularity in France, America and China. It provides compelling reasons for regarding Auster as a major contemporary American writer and at the same time introduces the contents of this dissertation.

The first chapter is primarily devoted to *The Invention of Solitude* and can be read as Auster's inquiry of his historical identity and situation. In the first section of the book, *Portrait of an Invisible Man*, Auster attempts to penetrate the mystery of his father's self and render it into words. This attempt drives Auster to embark on the frequently recurring quest for father in Jewish literature. Many of Auster's fiction are structured around the son's quest for the father. In most cases, the quest does not close in on itself; instead, it extends and transforms into various quests for identity, truth, justice, and the nature of narration and representation. In the second section, *The Book of Memory*, Auster's attempt to understand his own self gradually gives way to the meditation on the role of memory in the construction of identity, hence bringing into the foreground all his concerns of traumatic Jewish history, the possible way of individual and national redemption, and the Jewish attitude towards writing. Moreover, as Auster's epistemological and philosophical thinking is largely shaped by existentialist ideas, his exploration of Jewish themes and images is inextricably entangled with the existentialist concepts of the self, death and being. The paradox of death and rebirth is the central connotation of Auster's recurring image "room": the room not only conveys the ontological fear of solitude and death, but it is also the original site of imagination and creativity.

The second chapter takes up the discussion of freedom and explores Auster's social and political quest for understanding of human situation. Auster's understanding of freedom contains some ambiguous implications. On the one hand, he believes that freedom is an essential trait of spirit, developing according to its own inner law rather than in response to some extrinsic forces. On the other hand, he contends that a person's freedom is always limited by several factors. The first and foremost factor is the innate contradiction of freedom itself: the obsession with freedom turns man into the captive of compulsion, and freedom reveals its oppressive character in his

addiction for it. Secondly, chance, either as an aspect of meaningless randomness or as a glimpse into the mysterious structure of the universe, is also a factor that dominates an individual's existence. Thirdly, Auster understands the self as an effect of disciplinary and normalizing power regimes. In *The Music of Chance*, American society is a highly disciplined society. The web of discipline in this carceral society shapes the individual into a docile, obedient subject. His obedience not only comes from his subjection to rules and orders that are exercised continually around him and upon him, but also from his automatic function of all the suppression upon himself. Through charting the protagonists' futile struggle for self-determination and freedom in the novel, Auster reveals the fact that the late twentieth-century American capitalism determines with irresistible force the lives of all Americans that are born into the system, especially those who are confined to the stratum of the have-nots. Although Power constrains everyone, the poor are always the ones that are most violently threatened and exploited. In this way, Auster explores the disillusionment of the American Dream, which is also one of the major themes in *Leviathan* and *City of Glass*.

The third chapter traces Auster's linguistic quest for knowledge and identity. Based on the profound split between sign and referent as well as between the signifier and the signified, the quest for knowledge in *The New York Trilogy* cannot come to rest in closure: there is no meaning to unravel, or, even if there is one, it is forever deferred. This concept of language not only prevents the detectives from decoding evidence and understanding reality, but it further thwarts them to identify (intentional) criminals: there is no true core of a Self, but many Selves that are fluctuating and changeable, refusing to add up to a whole Self. This fragmentation and impenetrability of the self frustrates the detectives' attempt to understand their opponents, which, in turn, releases the mystery of the self inside the detectives themselves. During the process of detection, what the detectives face is not only the missing self of their opponents, but the lost, doubled, stolen or exchanged identities of themselves. However, it would be wrong to conclude that Auster denies any possibility of establishing identity. In fact, he believes that a unified identity is still available. It is not constructed merely by one's roles in personal life; it consists both of his historical identity as a member of a specific ethnic group and his role as a participant in the world.

The fourth chapter investigates the anti-genre narrative mode of Auster's quests. Although most of Auster's novels are written within the conventions of certain genres, they invariably subvert the models in the process of narration. In *The Invention of Solitude*, Auster reveals that postmodernist (auto-)biography has undergone a radical shift from its original emphases on authority, authenticity and coherence to the emphasis on experimentation. It not only recognizes the impossibility of achieving the completeness of the self, but it blurs the border between fact and fiction to represent the chaos in life and disqualifies the author as the exclusive authority on writing. In *The New York Trilogy*, Auster subverts the conventions of detective story by constructing a labyrinthine world of text that is made up of spatial maze, self-negating narrative and transworld characters. He peppers the three novels with his autobiographical information, making the characters double not only one another, but the author as well. The fictionalization of the author disrupts the logic of narrative hierarchy, hence further destabilizing the already fluid and unstable fictional reality. In *The Music of Chance*, the plot moves from journey to enforced fixity, depriving the novel of the structural foundation of the picaresque narrative. However, it is important to note that subversion is not the final goal of Auster's quests; rather, it is a way to represent the process of understanding. And this process of understanding, in Auster's eyes, is what finally defines an individual's existence.

The conclusion of this dissertation gives a general comment on the contributions and limitations of Auster's writing. Auster is distinguished from other contemporary American writers by his obsession with the quest of being. For him, the true purpose of art is not to create beautiful objects, but to penetrate the world and find one's place in it. This attempt to understand is the driving power that forces Auster's protagonists to embark on various quests. Auster takes into consideration all the historical, ethnical, linguistic and ideological influences and tries to reach a comprehensive understanding of being that finally derives from human connections. However, it should be noted that Auster's worldview is essentially negative. His intense personal despair derives from the lack of certainty associated with contemporary American living experience. When this uncertainty is transferred from the enigma of reality to the ontological questions of language, self and authorship, indeterminacy eventually becomes all encompassing. Auster reacts with the courage of despair in two ways: the creation of despairing but

persevering characters and the exposition of writing process that never abandons the struggle to make sense of what has no sense. But this stance constitutes at the same time the very limitation of his work. Auster's social critique never goes further to yield any advocacy of profound social engagement and commitment. His protagonists, more often than not, are the individuals who possess a limited perception of the working of the world. They indulge in their solitary consciousness rather than work for the general benefits of the masses. This egoism finally prevents them from achieving self-fulfillment through serving the needs of the world progress.

Key Words: postmodernism; existentialism; quest; being

摘要

美国当代作家保罗·奥斯特（1947-）现著有十八部小说，三部回忆录，一部诗选，一部评论集和四部电影剧本。在《纽约三部曲》发表以前，奥斯特因翻译并主编《兰顿二十世纪法国诗歌选集》和撰写过若干颇富洞见的评论文章而小有名气。三部曲发表以后，他名声大振，在很短的时间内即被捧为名流，引起各国文学界的瞩目。1995年后，与他有关的评论文著激增。他被誉为美国当代最杰出的作家之一，并常常与纳散尼尔·霍桑、塞缪尔·贝克特、罗布—格里耶等文学大师相提并论。

美国评论家斯文·博克特斯曾将奥斯特喻为“当代美国文人盛宴中的一个幽灵”（Birkerts, 1992: 338）。奥斯特在他的作品中揉和后现代主义文学理论和技巧、存在主义思想以及清新流畅的散文风格。他作品中所蕴涵的思想深意，以及他长期以来对个体存在意义的孜孜以求，都赋予了他的小说以当代美国小说所罕有的哲学深度。奥斯特致力展现充满偶然和荒谬的现代生活。偶然因素是他定义现实主义的一个关键内容。他认为生活本无意义，但个体只要存在就必然追求真理和意义。这种对虚无的接受和对意义的追寻，成为奥斯特小说不断探索的主题。他的主人公多为骚动不安的追寻者，或者在广袤无垠的美国大陆上向着未知的目标孤独前行，或者沉迷于内心世界的漫游，努力寻找能赋予他们生命以丰富内涵的心灵启迪。纠葛于一个能指不断滑动延展的文本世界中，这些主人公的命运取决于他们是否能在追寻意义的过程中适应身处的环境。他们对无意义为生命第一法则的接受或拒绝，以及他们能否在绝望边缘仍怀有奋力向前的勇气，最终决定了他们的成功或失败。

近两年来，随着奥斯特七部小说被译成中文，他在我国读者群中的影响日趋扩大，但尚未引起我国文学评论界的足够重视，关于他的评论文章也屈指可数。这种状况在一定程度上阻碍了我国读者对这位美国文坛名将的充分认识。本论文对奥斯特小说中所关注的许多问题进行了初步的探讨，以期能够成为我国读者理解奥斯特的基础研究之作，同时也力邀国内同仁对他的小说世界进一步深入进行

研究。

本论文侧重考察奥斯特的创作主题。在二十几年的创作过程中，奥斯特的小说始终围绕着若干主题，如个体的生存困境，自我本质的秘密，语言的词难达意，理解的多重角度以及当代生活中所弥漫的认识肯定的缺失。这些主题构成了奥斯特对存在意义的不懈追寻，追寻也因此成为本论文的叙述主题，它展现了奥斯特的主人公们为理解生活、理解自我而上下求索的艰难历程。

鉴于奥斯特小说所体现的主题多重化和体裁多样性，本论文采用辩证的批评方法，将历史分析、哲学理论研究和具体的文本阐释结合起来。论文涉及了奥斯特的八部被公认为经典佳作的小说。笔者认为对于它们的分析研究将有助于中国读者了解奥斯特的诗学特征。这些小说所体现的主题和写作技巧使得后现代派文学理论和存在主义思想成为行之有效的批评工具，但本文并未对它们进行全面系统地研究，而是选取其中与作品相契合的理论部分进行分析和引用。此外，论文还引用了与作品相关的其它哲学和文学理论，如福柯的权力关系理论，犹太主义关于赎罪和重生的理论，以及马克思主义思想中关于自由的论述。这些观点也为理解奥斯特的小说主题提供了恰当的理论背景。

本论文包括绪论、四个章节和结束语。绪论部分介绍了奥斯特生平经历和文学成就、他所处的历史文化背景、相关的哲学和文学理论影响、以及他的作品在法国、美国和中国的反应。它为解读作为美国当代著名作家的奥斯特提供了背景知识，同时也介绍了本论文的主要内容。

论文的第一章主要探讨奥斯特的发轫之作《孤独及其所创造的》。这部回忆录也是奥斯特诗学的奠基之作，它几乎涵盖了其后所有作品中不断出现的重要主题。尽管奥斯特从未将犹太思想作为创作的核心内容，但犹太传统仍构成了作品的文化底蕴，常常直接地或以隐喻的形式揭示自身的存在。《孤独及其所创造的》这部回忆录具有明显的犹太文学特性。它的中心思想是对过去的追忆，尤其是对犹太家庭历史和犹太民族历史的追忆。因此，这部作品可以解读为奥斯特对于自己历史身份和历史处境的追寻和理解。在回忆录的第一部分《隐形人的肖像》中，奥斯特力图理解已故的父亲并将之付诸文字，这种努力使得作品再现了犹太文学中常见的寻父主题。奥斯特此后的作品也常常围绕着子对父的追寻，但这个主题并不仅仅局限于自身，而是延伸变形为对身份、真理和正义的追寻，甚至扩展为

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