

Bernd Herzogenrath, *An Art of Desire: Reading Paul Auster*. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1999. Postmodern Studies 21. Series editors: Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens. 245 pp.; ISBN 90-420-0453-3; paper.

Two decades after Paul Auster's debut as a novelist and three decades after his debut as a poet and essayist we finally see the first book-length study of his work. In 1995, a highly recommendable collection of articles by various critics entitled *Beyond the Red Notebook* (Pennsylvania University Press) was published. A study of several works by one critic only, however, is another thing entirely. Herzogenrath's book is a coherent and ambitious study, approaching four very different novels within a common and consistent theoretical framework. *An Art of Desire: Reading Paul Auster* provides in-depth studies of *City of Glass* (1985), the first part of the modern classic *The New York Trilogy* (1985-86), and the three novels following immediately after the trilogy: *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), *Moon Palace* (1989) and *The Music of Chance* (1990). These novels and the last two of the trilogy form the core of Auster's work, and the later works (*Leviathan* (1992), *Mr. Vertigo* (1994), *Hand to Mouth* (1997), *Timbuktu* (1999)) have not received, nor quite deserved, the same amount of critical attention.

The book begins with a thorough introduction followed by four main sections, one for each novel plus a brief concluding chapter. Each of the main sections is divided into two

chapters, the first placing the novel within a generic framework and the following presenting a detailed analysis of the novel. In the introduction, the theoretical standpoint is outlined and it is made clear that part of the book's intention is to introduce the reader to 'Lacan's and Derrida's theory of the subject and of language' (8).

In the first section, the reading of *City of Glass* is preceded by a chapter (1) on the detective story from Poe via Conan Doyle to the American hard-boiled private eye fictions (Hammett, Chandler). The focus is on the redefinition of the detective's role from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. In a tight analysis Herzogenrath shows how the emphasis changes from Poe's idea about 'the Bi-Part Soul' – the psyche as split into a creative and a rational half, both equally necessary in solving the mystery – to the British tradition, after Sherlock Holmes in particular, in which the unravelling of the crime is presented first and foremost as a logical exercise in upper-class rural settings (Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey stories as the prime example). The hard-boiled American detective story openly opposes this development and introduces the body, instincts, blood, and guts to narratives unfolding within the lower reaches of urban society. This legendary American 'private eye' tradition is the one genre Auster's early work most explicitly relates to. The genre, however, quickly fell prey to exploitation in an endless number of magazines, comic strips and television series, and not until the late 1960s was it 'rediscovered' and recycled by authors from other realms of literary life, such as Pynchon, Eco, and Nabokov. Auster himself published a detective pot-boiler, *Squeeze Play*, pseudonymously in the 1970s, now reprinted under his own name in *Hand to Mouth*. Herzogenrath describes in broad terms how these late or post-modern writers deconstructed the genre and created strongly textualized universes for their 'detectives' to roam endlessly, experiencing that every answer they struggle to come up with proves to be the beginning of a new question, and realising that every sign has more than one referent.

In the second chapter, the study enters another mode where the close-readings interact with, and indeed hinge on, Lacanian theory. Herzogenrath's extensive knowledge of structuralist and post-structuralist theory takes him a long way into the interpretation of a central aspect of Auster's work; the complex interplay between language and identity-formation. After an initial discussion of the main themes in *City of Glass*, the discourse moves into a discussion of the novel side by side with theoretical notions. The post-structuralist reading strategy leads to a *tour de force* through a number of the core texts of post-structuralist thinking, from Derrida's *Of Grammatology* to Lacan's *Écrits* and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. There is a slight tendency to repeat conclusions but in general the method of 'grafting' the literary texts onto the theoretical texts, and vice versa, is convincing and eye-opening. Both the theoretical notions and the literary work are enriched by this approach when it is carried out as skilfully as here.

In the second section, *In the Country of Last Things* is placed within a generic framework involving not only science fiction but also '(post)apocalyptic fiction.' The first chapter (3) is somewhat cluttered, and this is the one instance where the genre definition seems somewhat out of place. The generic definitions are deconstructed and twisted to such an extent that we end up with a 're-conceptualized' version of science fiction that would not apply to many works. Despite the flaws, this chapter still provides interesting insights, for instance on the peculiar way in which Auster's works relate to realism. The

close reading of *In the Country of Last Things* (chapter 4) is relatively brief compared to the thorough discussions of the other novels.

In contrast to this, the third section is thorough and works very well. The preliminary chapter (5) relates *Moon Palace* to 'the picaresque mode' in a useful and straightforward manner, thereby providing an excellent basis for the subsequent analysis of the novel. The analysis (chapter 6) is no less than brilliant, creating an equilibrium between primary text and theory. The novel remains the focal point, while at the same time introducing and deftly employing new concepts. What is interesting in particular are the thoughts on romantic and postmodern theories of the sublime in relation to the theme of art and representation in this novel.

The fourth and last section opens with a chapter (7) on the road movie and the road novel in the American tradition, but also – in a by now familiar move – encompasses both Heidegger's notion of freedom and Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In chapter 8, Herzogenrath shows how Freud's notion of a 'death drive' is closely connected to the deathward plot of *The Music of Chance*, and the chapter accentuates how well the Lacanian approach works, not least because the novel in question revolves indirectly around some of the constitutive and very fundamental elements of the psyche. This difficult and strange novel has received scarce attention by critics indeed, a fact which underlines the originality of this reading that allows the profound qualities of *The Music of Chance* to shine through and assume a definite shape.

The concluding chapter reiterates Herzogenrath's conviction, by now strongly substantiated, that Auster's works are indeed examples of 'an art of desire' in Derrida and Lacan's sense of the word: the desire for 'free play'. The novels are universes without a fixed centre inhabited by characters longing for one. Slowly the protagonists realise that, insofar as any centre exists, it 'shifts with each event that propels it forward,' as *City of Glass* puts it. This applies to the book as well: the centre of the reading is always what is being read now, here. The desire is a result of the tension between, on the one hand, the romantic-utopian idea that there *must* be a core of existence, something stable to cling to, and, on the other, the hard-earned modern experience that 'everything that is solid melts into air,' to quote Marx and Marshall Berman. Consequently, the study suitably closes with one last and very appropriate quote from Lacan: 'There is no Truth.... But one runs after it all the same.'

Paradoxically, the weakness and the strength of this book derive from the same fact – the heavy theoretical framework. The reader used to the vocabulary and the juxtaposition of theory and fiction may concentrate on the actual interpretations, whereas the reader new to this kind of approach may experience some frustration trying to take in a huge amount of theory and at the same time to learn more about Auster's works. This book is definitely not meant as an introduction to Auster but there are enormous benefits to reap for the avid Auster fans, and they might at the same time use it as a good introduction to post-structuralist theory at work.