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Synonymous with "simplicity, plainness; rusticity," and characteristic of "domestic life; ordinary, everyday"(OED), homeliness evokes the familiar, the norm, the trivial, the permanent, the foreseeable, the regular or the routine. By definition, then, homeliness holds little value as subject matter for writing. As formalized in Claude Shannon's theory of communication, what is certain and inevitable is not worth communicating, and what is highly predictable may be briefly communicated. On the other hand, what is unforeseeable or highly unexpected is worth being elaborated on (Gleick, 215–231). Shannon's theory of communication seems to resonate with Paul Auster's conception of writing, of a story, and of storytelling. Auster's writing seems to address the question: what is worth being written about? Disastrous events (events that Auster defines as occurring suddenly and causing time to rupture into a before and after[1]), a sudden turn of events, chance, and coincidence are at the heart of this prolific author's writing, and have gained and sustained the interest of most of Auster's critics. Since the publication of Dennis Barone's *Beyond the Red Notebook* (1995), much of Austerian criticism has leaned towards postmodernist readings of his work in order to discuss the complex network of notions—such as chance, coincidence, solitude, loss, doubles, duplicity, quests, or even the process of writing[2]—that govern his writings and mark the extraordinary events that are narrated. Yet, what could merit further attention is the very texture of this complexity, that is to say, the details and the trivialities that often are so obvious or insignificant that they may go unnoticed, but are in fact crucial to understand how events operate in Auster's works. Therefore, since most (if not all) of his stories are centered around the unexpected and the extraordinary, one may wonder what place homeliness and domesticity holds in his fiction.

Indeed, on looking closer at his body of work, we notice the presence of elements of homeliness, of ordinariness, contrasting with the extraordinary. For instance, rather than focusing on historical or collective events, Auster's narratives throb with individual, personal, and domestic occurrences. From the death of his father in the first section of *The Invention of Solitude*, to the disintegration of his relationship with his first wife in *Report from the Interior*, and from Peter Stillman's disastrous past and Daniel Quinn's disappearance in *City of Glass* (*The New York Trilogy*) to the familial tragedy that haunts Miles Heller in *Sunset Park*, Auster's autobiographies and novels also call into question the private or domestic sphere. Additionally, alongside the unexpected and extraordinary events in Auster's autobiographical and novelistic work are to be found ample descriptions of routine, everyday life, and banalities.[3] However, the ordinary is not only manifested in the plots of Auster's works, but also in his style. A distinctive feature of Auster's style that pervades his novelistic and autobiographical work is the lack (if not absence) of metaphors, and

1 The narrator of *Leviathan* commenting on Benjamin Sachs's disaster (his accidental fall) says "Perhaps Ben's life did break in two that night, dividing into a distinct before and after […]." (119)

2 Some of the most significant works dealing with these questions include Ilana Shiloh's *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest: On the Road to Nowhere* (2002), Brendan Martin's *Paul Auster's Postmodernity* (2007), and Evija Trofimova's *Paul Auster's Writing Machine: A Thing to Write With* (2014).

3 M.S. Fogg's everyday life in his New York apartment until his eventual homelessness in *Moon Palace*, and descriptions of Ben Sachs's and Lillian's routine when Ben, uninvited, moves into her Berkeley house in an attempt to compensate for having accidentally killed her husband, Dimaggio, in *Leviathan*, are two of the most striking instances of descriptions of ordinary, everyday life.

a conventional (normative) syntax, which attributes a quality of ordinariness to his writing. Put differently, Auster's style is one that is characterized by a lack of "style"—a question that we will return to and attempt to elaborate in this study.

From this juxtaposition of the ordinary lives of Auster's characters, with the extraordinary events that punctuate them and disrupt them, emerges a reading hypothesis. This cohabitation of the ordinary with the extraordinary gestures towards a peculiar relationship between the two categories – a relationship that is not so much a binary opposition, as it is an articulation, a chiasmus, if not a fusion. In order to explore this seeming chiasmus, the structure of this essay itself will attempt to follow a chiastic pattern. We will first look at the ordinary as a condition of possibility of the extraordinary in Auster's work, that is to say how Auster's aim of telling singular, disastrous events paradoxically forces him to tell the banal, the repetitive; in other words, how the *extra*-ordinary emerges out of the ordinary. We will then go on to examine how the extraordinary, in turn, appears as the condition of possibility for the ordinary, through the notion of repetition, especially in the aftermath of a traumatic event.

The ordinary and the extraordinary are not so much *topoi* in Auster's work as they are, instead, a central narrative strategy. The ordinary is put into place as a framework within which the extraordinary is made to occur. Such an operation is carried out, in its most striking instance, by resorting to his classic, recurrent, and contrasting themes of quest and chance.

One of the most common points of departure of Auster's novels and autobiographies is a quest. His protagonists all undertake various quests, which include, among others: geographical, metaphysical, ontological, literary, and familial quests.[4] The *topos* of the quest presents a pattern of predictability through a strong sense of causal order, since the characters that embark on quests usually do so with goals, intentions, and steps that are usually clearly set. This predictability and causality of events is key in opening up the possibility for the unpredictable or the extraordinary—indeed, "chance" events—to occur. The quest therefore functions as a matrix of horizontality (the physical wanderings of the characters, the horizontality of the signifiers of the stories' text being written by Auster's characters, who are all figures of a writer) that makes possible the verticality of the unpredictable or chance events, since chance is indeed that which "falls down on you from the sky," as the protagonist Anna Blume of *In the Country of Last Things* (43) puts it.

This Austerian conception of chance happens to echo that of Derrida. In his speech delivered at the Washington School of Psychiatry (later published as an essay "My Chances/Mes Chances: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies"), Derrida says:

> For the moment, let us do no more than take note of this law or coincidence that in an odd way associates chance and luck with the downward movement, the finite throw

4 For instance, Auster's career as a writer of prose (which followed his short-lived career as a poet) is inaugurated by his autobiographical work, *The Invention of Solitude*, which involves a quest that is at once literary and familial: he attempts to create an account of his "absent" father's life through writing. A quest is also the starting point of *In the Country of Last Things* in which Anna Blume travels to the titular "Country of Last Things" in search of her brother, William. M.S. Fogg in Moon Palace undertakes several quests, from his quest for identity in the streets of New York and in Central Park, to his search for his father Solomon Barber.

> (which must therefore end up by falling back down), the fall, the incident, the accident, or precisely the coincidence. To attempt to think chance would be in the first place to interest oneself in the *experience* (I emphasize this word) of what happens unforeseeably. And there are those who would be inclined to think that unforeseeability conditions the very structure of the event. An event that can be anticipated and therefore apprehended or comprehended, an event without absolute encounter, is that an event in the full sense of the word? Some would be inclined to say that an event worthy of this name does not announce itself in advance. One must not see it coming. If one anticipates what is coming, which is then outlined horizontally on a horizon, there is no pure event. So, one might say: no horizon for the event or the encounter, only the unforeseeable and on a vertical axis. The alterity of the other—which does not reduce itself to the economy of our horizon—always comes to us from on high; it is indeed the very high [*le très haut*]. (Derrida 2007, 349)

For Derrida, the experience of chance—which is to be equated with the event—is the experience of the vertical, in contrast to the horizontality of the foreseeable or predictable. The various levels at which this duality exists, for Derrida, are all present in Auster's works. Verticality and horizontality being foremost spatial concepts, the verticality of a chance event is orchestrated in spatial terms in Auster's writings: Benjamin Sachs's accidental fall from the fourth floor of a building in *Leviathan*; the accidental falling of eggs on the floor (perceived as a misfortune of cosmic proportions by the protagonist) in *Moon Palace*. This spatiality is also diffusely at work in the realm of language, and it is indeed interesting to note that Derrida uses the French word "*chute*" [fall] in his original text[5] to designate the movement of chance. Whether in English, or in French, chance or extraordinary events are said to "fall" or "befall," and as mentioned above, Auster, through his character Anna Blume, uses the same term. Derrida's "finite throw" ("*jet fini*," in the French), which gestures towards finitude and death, reminds us of the locution *alea jacta est* – another linguistic articulation of the verticality of chance.

As seen above, it is the concept of encounter that binds the two aspects of chance, i.e. the unforeseeability and the verticality. In Auster's works, encounter can also be taken to mean a chance encounter with another character or with a character's fate, or even both, as in the case of the character Jackpot (Jack Pozzi) in *The Music of Chance,* on accidentally encountering whom, Nashe's (the protagonist's) fate changes; or in the case of Maria Turner, whose accidental encounter with Ben Sachs in *Leviathan* gives his life an unexpected and disastrous turn. The encounter—or the extraordinary event—is thus the

5 "Contentons-nous pour l'instant de remarquer cette loi ou cette coïncidence qui associe étrangement le hasard ou la chance avec le mouvement vers le bas, le jet fini (qui donc doit finir par retomber), la chute, l'incident, l'accident ou justement la coïncidence." (Derrida 1983, 7) [For the moment, let us do no more than take note of this law or coincidence that in an odd way associates chance and luck with the downward movement, the finite throw (which must therefore end up by falling back down), the fall, the incident, the accident, or precisely the coincidence. (Derrida 2007, 349)]

intersection point between horizontality and verticality, that is to say, between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Derrida's concluding lines in the passage quoted above summarizes the instance of an encounter as the blurring between the *alter* (the other) and the *altus* (the very high, the altitude, and thus, the unexpected that falls), which in turn blurs the boundary that separates the extraordinary from the ordinary. In other words, if the extraordinary event is that which contrasts with the ordinary, it challenges the two seemingly contrasting categories to the point of operating a chiasmus: the one crosses over into the other.

Such a chiastic structure is also present in the context of the ailing characters in Auster's novels. A few of his novels start out by presenting a protagonist who has been diagnosed with a terminal illness. For instance, *Oracle Night* opens with Sidney Orr (the protagonist and the homodiegetic narrator) declaring he had been sick for a long time,[6] while Nathan Glass—the protagonist and homodiegetic narrator of *Brooklyn Follies*—opens the novel with the announcement of his approaching death: "I was looking for a quiet place to die," (1) which, as we learn later, resulted from his being diagnosed with lung cancer. Furthermore, both protagonists echo, almost verbatim, each other's lack of hope for survival. Whereas Sidney Orr says: "They [the doctors] had given me up for dead" (2004, 1), Nathan Glass claims: "I had given myself up for dead." (2006, 3) However, Sidney Orr and Nathan Glass also have in common the fact that despite their respective grim prognoses with which their narratives open, they both manage to survive at the end of the novels, and come to terms with this unexpected gift of life. In the event of an illness as serious as theirs, premature death becomes the expected, the normal, or the ordinary. However, when both characters defeat the foreseeability of death and manage to survive, it is life (the actuality of living) that becomes the unexpected, the extraordinary. In this sense, the ailing characters who manage to survive operate a chiasmus in which the categories of life and death are not only inversed, but also cross over into each other, once again blurring the distinction between the extraordinary and the ordinary.

One question then arises: if the ordinary and the extraordinary are so intimately tied, by which process—if any—might we be able to tell them apart? A possible answer could be: reading. It is through the act of reading—or interpreting—that an ordinary event may be perceived as extraordinary for the Austerian character. The most striking (although by no means the only) instance of this would be the episode of the falling and breaking of eggs in *Moon Palace*. On the brink of pennilessness (and consequently, starvation and homelessness), M.S. Fogg experiences one day the loss of his eggs, which constituted his already very meager supply of food:

> The two eggs I was about to place in a pot of water and boil up for my daily meal slipped through my fingers and broke on the floor. Those were the last two eggs of my current supply, and I could not help feeling that this was the cruelest, most terrible thing that had ever happened to me. The eggs landed with an ugly splat. I remember standing there in horror as they oozed out over the floor. The sunny, translucent innards sank into the cracks, and

6 "I had been sick for a long time. When the day came for me to leave the hospital, I barely knew how to walk anymore, could barely remember who I was supposed to be." (1)

> suddenly there was muck everywhere, a bobbing slushof slime and shell. One yolk had miraculously survived the fall, but when I bent down to scoop it up, it slid out from under the spoon and broke apart. I felt as though a star were exploding, as though a great sun had just died. The yellow spread over the white and then began to swirl, turning into a vast nebula, a debris of interstellar gases. It was all too much for me – the last, imponderable straw. When this happened, I actually sat down and cried. (41–42)

What could be considered a trivial or commonplace occurrence—the falling and breaking of eggs—is magnified through Fogg's reading and interpretation of it, after the fact. In this case, the experience of an ordinary event as extraordinary is only possible through the act of reading. The extra-ordinary emerges out of the ordinary; the ordinary is the condition of possibility of the *extra*-ordinary. The act of reading is, however, unreliable, and fails to mark a clear distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary by further contributing to their confusion. Moreover, perceiving an ordinary event as extraordinary through the deliberate act of reading constitutes a form of madness – the madness, or the disease of reading that Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* call "interpretosis" (127)[7]. We could then even go so far as to say that the very act of reading a text—any text—consists in turning the ordinary into the extraordinary.

In Auster's work, the creation of the extraordinary out of the ordinary is not only to be found on the thematic plane, but can also be observed on the stylistic plane. The most unexpected, exceptional or extraordinary event (be it Glass's illness in *Brooklyn Follies*, or Master Yehudi's death in *Mr. Vertigo*, or Ben Sachs's accident in *Leviathan*, or the sudden assault experienced by Adam Walker and Born in *Invisible*, or the chance encounter with Pozzi in *The Music of Chance*) in Auster's narratives is always articulated in the most normative form of language. As mentioned earlier, in Auster's writing, linguistic conventions are always respected, and metaphors are rare. The result is an ordinary or homely prose, which is neither subversive nor marginal. Indeed, the Austerian narrative cannot be said to belong to what Deleuze and Guattari name "minor literature." In attempting to define "minor literature" in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari write: "Only the possibility of setting up a minor practice of major language from within allows one to define popular literature, marginal literature, and so on." (18) If one of the main characteristics of "minor literature" is the unconventional use of a major language, or the use of language that deviates from ordinary language, then "minor literature" seems to boil down to a question of style. In fact, when attempting to define "style" in his series of television interviews with Claire Parnet (*L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*), Deleuze himself defines style as the creation of a "foreign language" within one's native tongue. Given this definition of style, one could question the marginality of this "foreign" language carved by an author within his native tongue: firstly because this language is already latent in the native tongue from which it is carved, and secondly, because its popularity, or its adoption by other authors could push it

7 "In truth, significance and interpretosis are the two diseases of the earth or the skin, in other words, humankind's fundamental neurosis." (Deleuze and Guattari, 127)

over into the territory of the canonical. This seeming marginality then becomes the ordinary, the norm. In this sense, Auster's use of ordinary language in his novels and autobiographies winds up setting him apart from the canonical or the conventional. Following linguistic conventions paradoxically causes him to deviate from the norm of deviation itself, thus reinforcing his singularity. Auster's ordinary style, then, is nothing less than *extra*-ordinary; its extraordinariness is once again rooted in the ordinary, further problematizing the two categories.

The fact that Auster's ordinary language is the mark of his entire novelistic and autobiographical work leads us to believe that this linguistic conventionality is not a chance occurrence, but a deliberate, sovereign choice on the part of the author. The ordinariness of his prose is therefore a construct, rather than an accident. But the practice of constructing the ordinary is not limited to the author himself, on the meta-narrative plane, and can also be noticed in the choices made by his characters and the unfolding of their stories, and several characters are shown in the process of creating or constructing their routines – their ordinary, everyday lives.

For Paul Auster's characters, the construction of the ordinary may begin within the spatial realm, for instance, through the construction (though not in the strictly material sense of the term) of their homes. In certain cases, the spatial construction of the ordinary may stem from an extraordinary event. In the instance of *The Music of Chance*, Nashe's life suddenly changes when he inherits, one day, unexpectedly, a large sum of money after his estranged father dies. He quits his job, leaves his daughter with his sister, leaves behind the life he knows, and embarks on a year-long journey cruising across the country in the car he buys from the inherited money:

> Speed was of the essence, the joy of sitting in the car and hurtling himself forward through space. That became a good beyond all others, a hunger to be fed at any price. Nothing around him lasted for more than a moment, and as one moment followed another, it was as though he alone continued to exist. He was a fixed point in a whirl of changes, a body poised in utter stillness as the world rushed through him and disappeared. The car became a sanctum of invulnerability, a refuge in which nothing could hurt him anymore. (10–11)

Nashe's new car thus has all of the significant attributes of a home: a place of safety, shelter, comfort, joy, and refuge, and his new routine consists in driving around in his car. Nashe's choice of a car as his new home is intriguing: whereas a home, by definition implies immobility, Nashe's new home is one that juxtaposes movement and stasis, mobility and immobility. Although there is nothing ordinary or commonplace about living in one's car, this practice becomes ordinary when it is subject to repetition in time: the repetition of an extraordinary phenomenon over time, renders it banal, causes it to *become* ordinary. Therefore, in Nashe's case, the ordinary is a deliberate construct, which is the product of space (the car) and time (repetition).

In Auster's fiction, Nashe's simultaneous state of (voluntary) homelessness and refuge in *The Music of Chance* is preceded by M.S. Fogg's experience in *Moon Palace*. As part of a philosophical and ontological experiment of sorts, which was born of despair, the protagonist of *Moon Palace*, Marco Stanley

Fogg, adopts a life of voluntary homelessness[8]. We learn in the course of the novel that Fogg's experience of living in the streets takes him to Central Park, which, over time, becomes his new home. During this period, he seeks shelter in a cave in Central Park:

> [A]t a certain point, I found a cluster of large rocks surrounded by overgrown foliage and trees. The rocks formed a natural cave, and without stopping to consider the matter any further, I crawled into this shallow indentation, pulled some loose branches in with me to block up the opening, and promptly fell asleep. (67)

Thus, Fogg makes his homelessness coincide with a short period of refuge: he builds himself a home in the cave, using branches to create a make-believe door, and seeks comfort through sleeping in this space. Like Nashe, Fogg also chooses a confined space in which to live. In fact, from A.'s tiny room at 6 Varick Street in New York, in *The Invention of Solitude*, to Miles Heller's small and inexpensive Florida apartment in a poor neighborhood in *Sunset Park*, Auster's autobiographical and novelistic work presents a host of characters who seek refuge in small or confined spaces. Homeliness, domesticity and security in Auster's work is therefore synonymous with confined spaces; it is achieved in circumstances that are nothing less than extraordinary.

The ordinary, however, is not only a spatial construct in his work. In certain instances, it can also gain a temporal dimension: through repetition. Auster's texts brim with characters that settle down into a routine by regularly and deliberately repeating an act or a scene. What triggers their repetition compulsion is a traumatic event that usually occurs in the wake of a coincidence, and as such, the traumatic event itself is already a repetition – coincidence being a modality of repetition. Auster's own definition and example of "coincidence" that appears in his *Collected Prose* hints at its inherent repetition: "[meeting] three people named George on the same day"[9] (540).

In the novel *Oracle Night*, for instance, when Richard—the brother-in-law of the protagonist's friend, John Trause—accidentally (coincidentally) comes across a 3D viewer with pictures of his deceased relatives, he enters into a pattern of repetition:

> The viewer was a magic lantern that allowed him to travel through time and visit the dead. He would look at the pictures in the morning before he left for work, and he would look at them in the evening after he came home. Always in the garage, always by himself, always away from his wife and children – obsessively returning to that afternoon in 1953, unable to get enough of it. The spell lasted for two months, and then one morning Richard went into the garage and the viewer didn't work… It was a catastrophic loss, the cruelest of deprivations… Another round of grief, another round of sorrow – as if,

8 "I wanted to live dangerously, to push myself as far as I could go, and then see what happened to me when I got there. As it turned out, I nearly did not make it. Little by little, I saw my money dwindle to zero; I lost my apartment; I wound up living in the streets" (1).

9 Here, the repeated element is the name "George."

> after bringing them back to life, he had to bury the dead all over again. (33–34)

The extraordinary coincidence of stumbling upon the 3D viewer brings back Richard's experience of trauma – the loss of his beloved family. The repeated act of seeing their photographs through the 3D viewer then becomes a way for him to master his trauma. In a similar vein, Benjamin Sachs in *Leviathan*, enters into a self-imposed pattern of repetition after his accidental fall from the fourth floor fire escape of a building:

> Something extraordinary had taken place, and before it lost its force within him, he needed to devote his unstinting attention to it. Hence his silence. It was not a refusal so much as a method, a way of holding onto the horror of that night long enough to make sense of it. To be silent was to enclose himself in contemplation, *to relive the moments of his fall again and again*, as if he could suspend himself in midair for the rest of time – forever just two inches off the ground, forever waiting for the apocalypse of the last moment. (134; my emphasis)

Sachs's "extraordinary" experience of the fall (which was the culmination of a series of coincidences) locks him in a pattern of repetition in which he recreates the experience over and over as a way to master the fall. And as Freud elaborates in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in the context of his grandson's (little Ernst's) *Fort-Da* game following the departure of his mother, repetition is indeed a means to gain mastery over a traumatic event. Gaining mastery over trauma through the repetition of the traumatic or the "extraordinary" works by transforming the extraordinary into the ordinary or the banal. In other words, the ordinary is produced—is constructed—through subjecting the extraordinary to the process of deliberate repetition over time. Repetition compulsion indeed consists in trivializing or rendering banal the extraordinary.

We have thus discussed how the ordinary and the extraordinary are intimately tied to each other, and how Paul Auster not only uses their ambivalence as a narrative technique, but also makes it part of his aesthetics. The beautiful is not banished from the realm of the banal. And neither is the sublime. Indeed, Auster's characters could be seen as aesthetes seeking beauty and the sublime in the most ordinary and homely experiences. While one might be tempted to associate the sublime with the experience of the extraordinary event, since both notions gesture towards excess—what is excessive, what transgresses the boundaries of the banal—our analysis might lead us in a slightly different direction: the sublime could perhaps be said to be experienced through repetition, *as* the ordinary.

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