

## A Portrait of the Indian Woman as a Ghost Dancer: Mother Sioux in Paul Auster's *Mr Vertigo*

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### Resumo

O presente artigo toma como ponto de partida os romances de Paul Auster, dos anos 80 aos anos 90, enquanto ficções centradas em torno da ficção e da natureza da criação artística, focalizando o modo como essa processualidade se apresenta em *Mr Vertigo*.

A personagem Mother Sioux, uma índia sioux e também uma "ghost dancer", desempenha um papel decisivo na transformação do protagonista, Walt Rawley, em escritor. Para este, a ficção apresenta-se como uma "necessidade", uma "ghost dance" que marca a diferença entre vida e morte.

### Abstract

This paper argues that Paul Auster, the American writer whose novels in the 1980's and 1990's are (auto-) reflexive fictions about fiction, presents a portrait of an artist as a young man, and a reflection about the nature of artistic creativity in *Mr Vertigo*.

Mother Sioux is an Oglala Sioux and ghost dancer, who plays a decisive role in Walt Rawley's education as a writer. Fiction becomes a "commitment", a ghost dance, for the protagonist, Walt, which establishes the difference between life and death.

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At the very beginning of their book *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*, Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury call the reader's attention to "a characteristic and flamboyant act of critical magic" performed by the critic Hugh Kenner in his penetrating guide through modernist territory *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers*. According to them,

"he links two elements in the history of the modern world that are independently celebrated, but not usually seen to be connected. One is the flight of the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk in 1903... The other is a work of fiction started the next year, in which the artist is portrayed as a modern flyer, Stephen Dedalus. The book is, of course, James Joyce's

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*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, about a modernist artist who soars on imaginary wings into the unknown arts, breaking with home, family, Catholic religion and his Irish nation in the process" (Ruland and Bradbury 1991:1).

The effect of Kenner's approach is to link American technological modernity and international modernism, a point that Ruland and Bradbury emphasize: "The Wrights set the new century's modern imagination soaring; when it landed again, it landed in America" (Ruland and Bradbury 1991:1).

Dedalus made the Cretan labyrinth to contain the Minotaur and he made the wings to leave the island. Stephen Dedalus prays to his name-saint who, according to Kenner, is "a saint whose miracles were explicable. Mathematics, aerodynamics, such codified lore, arcane to the impatient, might supply in modern times the efficacy of that moment when the orthodox saint invokes God, and is levitated. This means that if Dedalus is the artist's patron, art is no miracle but an intricate craft, the issue of which may seem miraculous" (Kenner 1977:XII). In the 1980s and 1990s, Paul Auster is one of the best examples of an American writer whose novels are (auto-)reflexive fictions about fiction, sometimes depending, in his own words, on "a kind of fictitious subterranean autobiography" (Auster 1992:260), a contributor to what is usually called the postmodern tradition who explores the world as a labyrinthine and confused text and who is engaged in a genuine act of openness to the "intricate" goings-on in the world.

Historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon 1988) or, in a broader approach, postmodernist fiction, "deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls 'post-cognitive': 'Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?' (Higgins 1978). Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on" (McHale 1994:10). All of Auster is there in the attempt to answer these postmodern concerns by means of a unique narrative skill and a subtle dialectic that directs his writing.

In *Mr Vertigo* (Auster 1994), an orphan from the Mid-West called Walter Claireborne Rawley is set on the road to fame by the mysterious and mesmerizing figure of Master Yehudi, a Hungarian who came to America as a young boy, a "kike" as Walt calls him (p.21), who initiates a tutorial process that will culminate in the novel's hero learning to levitate and fly. The book turns out to be another portrait of another artist as a young man. But it is also a meditation

on the nature of artistic creativity and inspiration, a conclusion that becomes apparent when the reader analyzes the circumstances under which the hero becomes a writer. This paper argues that a decisive role in that process is played by Mother Sue, also alluded to as "Sister Ma" (p.33), "Mother S." (p.56), or "She Who Smiles like the Sun" (p.74), a female character whose identity is more persuasively established in the text as Mother Sioux, an Oglala Sioux, a grandniece of Sitting Bull and "top bareback rider in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show" (p.21). As a young girl she had witnessed "the height of the Ghost Dance craze that swept through the Indian lands in the late 1880s" (p.73). The emphasis on this magical performance seemed to be the only available way for the native people to avoid their own extinction: "You could fly out of your body then, and the white man's bullets would no longer touch you, no longer kill you, no longer empty your veins of blood" (p.74). In the last pages of *Mr Vertigo* we learn that the hero, Walt the Wonder Boy, eventually finds the survival of his own self when the idea of writing the book occurs to him and turns into fact. This new identity as a writer saves him from the void and from the meaninglessness of his condition, long after his career as a public performer in the art of levitation has come to an end. An echo of Mother Sioux's memories of her own past can be detected when Walt finds a thread in the labyrinth that his life has always been and says to himself and to the reader: "You must learn to stop being yourself... You must let yourself evaporate, let your muscles go limp, breathe until you feel your soul pouring out of you, and then shut your eyes" (p.278).

As soon as Master Yehudi finds Walt on the streets of Saint Louis in 1924, he immediately chooses him as his pupil. The far-reaching effects of such a decision can hardly be understood when the first dialogue between them takes place. The conditions of what comes to be a strange pact are bluntly expressed however, "You're no better than an animal .... a piece of human nothingness .... If you stay where you are, you'll be dead before winter is out. If you come with me, I'll teach you how to fly" (p.3). In reading this passage, one feels that the tutor's intention is, unquestionably, to teach a young boy an initiatory secret: the way a human being can fly, literally, miraculously, for real. Or, one may add, as a parable - a highly witty yet complex one, of subtle allusions and meaning, with the concluding emergence from the realm of fact to the potentiality of fiction: the "experiencing self"-turned-"narrating self" (Stanzel 1971: 70-91) learns to fly the way an artist "flies" when puffed away by the appropriate wind. And so he performs an act of survival for himself, a specific ghost dance that guarantees an ultimate foundation outside the whims of contingency: "I was rescued by the idea of writing this book .... once *Mr Vertigo* is published, I won't have to be around to watch the mugwumps and morons try to kill me. I'll already be dead, and you can be sure I'll be laughing at them - from above or below, whichever the case may be" (pp.275, 276).

Master Yehudi takes little Walt to a mysterious house and farm on the great

plains in Kansas ("If someone had told me I'd just entered the Land of Oz, I don't think I would have known the difference" (pp.10-11)) where he learns the thirty-three stages to flight while a black boy called Aesop is taught to become, as the Master puts it, "a leader of his race, a shining example to all the downtrodden black folks of this violent, hypocritical country" (p.18). The Jew, the black boy and the white suffering orphan are watched over by Mother Sioux, the good Indian woman who is responsible for the humane dimension in this curious American grouping. She is less a sharply individualized character than a folk figure representative of a maternal goodness.

In Auster's fiction there are irrefutable signs of the absence, inconsistency, or blurring of the mother-figure, or, for that matter, of the feminine presence (Vallas 1995), obsessed as he is with the father-figure. The exceptions are certain feminine voices in *The Invention of Solitude* (Auster 1988) and the only non-masculine narrator in the author's novels, the persevering Anna Blume of *In the Country of Last Things* (Auster 1987b). But Mother Sioux strikes the reader as a matrix of knowledge, a voice that teaches Walt how to read the world, how to articulate it, how to survive and die in it.

In the memoir *The Invention of Solitude*, the voice of Billie Holiday singing *Solitude*, "song to accompany *The Book of Memory*" (p.123), launches a far-reaching reflection (p.123):

"First allusions to a woman's voice. To be followed by specific reference to several.

For it is his belief that if there is a voice of truth - assuming there is such a thing as truth, and assuming this truth can speak - it comes from the mouth of a woman."

There is a sense of wonder that A., Auster's reference to himself in the third-person, experiences when specific voices are evoked, those of Marina Tsvetayeva, Anne Frank, Emily Dickinson, Cassandra, and, above all, Sherhazad (p.153): "A voice that speaks, a woman's voice that speaks, a voice that speaks stories of life and death, has the power to give life." If we accept that "the experience in reading Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* is somewhat like being the king to whom Shehrzad tells her story" (Barone 1995:10), the same can be applied with equal truth to *Mr Vertigo*, or, with varying emphasis, to the whole body of Auster's writing. As the author puts it in *The Invention of Solitude* (p.151), the function of Sherhazad's story is "to make a man see the thing before his eyes by holding up another thing to view... and in so doing delight him... into a new feeling for life...".

The powerful effect of Mother Sioux's transitory presence on Walt in the narrative is clear evidence of the limits and possibilities of a Sherhazad ideal in Auster's universe (Vallas 1995:175). Together with Aesop, she opens a world for Walt and provides him with a background for the situation in which he is

found in the last pages of the novel, sitting at a desk in a parlor, putting words on paper very much in the same way Auster devotes himself to his writing locked up in a room. Significantly enough, the impressive feminine voices of *The Invention of Solitude*, from Tsvetayeva to Sherhazad, are all of them walled-up figures who sing their solitude because nobody else will do it for them. The voice of Walt speaking, transformed into words, is a strategy to survive his own solitude and to reinvent himself, looking back on his early youth and its aftermath.

When Walt first meets Mother Sioux, he observes: "The woman gazed at me for a couple of seconds with blank, stone-cold eyes, and then, out of nowhere, flashed one of the warmest, friendliest smiles I've ever had the pleasure to receive" (p.11). And a few moments afterwards, Master Yehudi warns him: "Treat her nice, and she'll give you only goodness in return. Cross her, and you'll regret the day you were born. She might be fat and toothless, but she's the closest thing to a mother you'll ever have" (p.12). It took him longer to adjust to Mother Sioux's "oddnesses" than it did with Aesop and Master Yehudi: because of her physical appearance, Walt had doubts about which sex she belonged to; he felt uncomfortable with her sometimes impenetrable face - "as remote and unyielding as a block of wood" (p.18); he resented her silence, her reserve, the mute rituals of her domestic chores, the not-so-pleasant side of Mother Sioux as figure of authority: "Mother Sue was a wall and every time I approached that wall I was turned into a puff of smoke, a tiny cloud of ashes scattering in the wind" (p.19). There are similarly telling perceptual notations in other passages. It is a homey, wholesome quality, however, that prevails in this Indian woman's character. She becomes a familiar force, a stable protection, up to the moment when, together with Aesop, she is massacred and murdered by the Ku Klux Klan.

When Walt begins to realize the full extent of Master Yehudi's manipulation of him, he tries to flee from his education. After one of those unsuccessful attempts, he falls sick and it is Mother Sioux who takes him in when he returns to the farm in a weakened condition, suffering from an illness without a given name, "the Ache of Being" (p.32) in Yehudi's opinion, fever burning within him. His condition serves as an index of his future ordeals: Walt undergoes initiation into the code of the Master's supremacy in a succession of terrifying, degrading, humiliating rituals, which mostly consist of physical suffering. This means that, although Mother Sioux is not much developed as a character, her presence in Auster's novel is framed not just as a decorative refrain but part of an initiation ritual - of the young boy entering the realm of grown-up complexity, and, eventually, of the young narrative artist coming to grips with his material and the creative process. The other crucial point to make here is that Mother Sioux's performance during Walt's illness has a peculiar resonance that keeps the reader aware of the representative aspect of the youngster's passage from street urchin to writer:

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“...and three times a day she would get up from her chair and do a dance around my bed, beating out a special rhythm on her Oglala drum as she chanted prayers to the Great Spirit, imploring him to look down on me with sympathy and make me well again. I don't suppose it could have hurt the cause, for no professional doctor was ever called in to examine me, and considering that I did come round and make a full recovery, it's possible that her magic was what did the trick” (p.32).

“I was still just a baby to her”, Walt thinks as his bond of consciousness develops, a “mama's boy” who, in her presence, is unable to stifle the emotions that are the root of his humanity. Because experience changes Walt's personality and identity, Mother Sioux's deeds and words have to be seen as the very first catalyst - “she was the person I trusted most in the world” (p.44). Her words reverberate in a self-revelation experienced in the past and made articulate during the time Walt performs (and Auster composes) the narrative (p.45):

“I saw it happen. When I was a little girl. I saw it with my own two eyes. And if it happened before, it can happen again.”

“You dreamed it. You thought you saw it, but it was only in your sleep.”

“My own father, Walt. My own father and my own brother. I saw them moving through the air like spirits. It wasn't flying the way you imagine it. Not like birds or moths, not with wings or anything like that. But they were up in the air, and they were moving. All slow and strange. As if they was swimming. Pushing their way through the air like swimmers, like spirits walking on the bottom of a lake”.

Walt does not only learn to fly. He and Yehudi combine transcendence and locomotion, which is also a stimulating trick for any “narrating self”. Walt the Wonder Boy rises not with the Wright brothers but with Charles Lindbergh and crashes with the Stock Market. But he eventually realizes that his identity is determined by the sum of complex experiences he has undergone after his personal breakdown. He remembers his career as a gangster, as the owner of a nightclub (*Mr Vertigo's*), his forced enlistment in the army, the different jobs after the war and his marriage for twenty-three years as well as his final reunion with an old sweetheart of Master Yehudi. This is an intense process of several decades throughout which Walt, the aerial artist, becomes the narrative artist. This is a long story that never gives in to loose picaresque because the metaphorical meanings of flight give it coherence. And Walt's final meditation joins the trick of flight and levitation to the hollowing-out that he presents as the artist's fundamental step, the ability to become nothing-in-himself in order to become another self.

The physical ordeals Master Yehudi had put him through were preparation enough. Because “you can't be whole to do what you have to do... [and] you

have to leave a part of yourself behind before you can attain the full magnitude of your gift" (p.88), Walt cut off the upper joint of his pinky finger; because "death lives inside you, eating away at your innocence and your hope" (p.41), Walt is buried alive, a fact that results in the most metaphorical stage in his education: if he wants to fly, so Master Yehudi apparently considers, he has to learn how to face death, earth, gravity - the true terrors of the artist who tries to achieve transcendence, the doubts of the writer about to confront the words that send him aloft.

The idea of writing a book constitutes, to paraphrase Walt's own words earlier in the novel (p.49), the final showdown between himself and himself. When he is sitting at a desk, "scratching away at the first sentence... pushing along from word to word" (p.275), he becomes Walter Claireborne Rawley, the writer. Writing itself assumes the condition of a moment of revitalization that is also characteristic of the ghost dance. On the other hand, Paul Auster's writing, structured as it is on the duplication and multiplication of identities, clearly defines the writer as ghost. Among other examples, one has to bear in mind the second part of *The New York Trilogy* (Auster 1987a), titled "Ghosts", where the dialogue between the characters Blue and Black, at a particular moment, is focused on American literary figures - Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne. Black declares (p.175):

"Writing is a solitary business. It takes over your life. In some sense, a writer has no life of his own. Even when he's there, he's not really there.

Another ghost.

Exactly.

Sounds mysterious.

It is..."

In "Ghosts", as Auster himself admits, the spirit of Thoreau is the prevailing force. And the author is fascinated by the hint of revelation that is implied in a sentence Hawthorne wrote in his *American Notebooks* about Thoreau and Walden Pond: "I think he means to live like an Indian among us." This means, above all, "to discover a more solid foundation for oneself" (Auster 1992:263). Since in the world according to Auster, reality is considerably more mysterious than we may ever admit and life is filled with "the music of chance", to use the title of another of his novels (Auster 1990), nothing can be overlooked in his fiction, not just the action or the quest to beget and re-beget one's own self, but also the always-interlocking resonance of Auster's fictional characters, the intertextual tension in his work, the anxieties his non-fictional prose discloses, the nature of the language of fiction.

Sir Walter Raleigh is often mentioned in Auster's writings as an impressive historical figure (Auster 1991: 164-69). *Mr Vertigo* is a fictional extension of

history's contingencies transmuted into a tale of initiation to the elemental acts of life and death, and also to the power of fiction in a world that eludes us forever. When we read this novel and consider other segments of Auster's prose involving Indians or Indian values, especially *Moon Palace* (Auster 1989), we come to the conclusion that, in this respect, we are talking about a fictional world that hovers between the presentation of Indians as exemplars of courage and endurance living in pristine nature, or as men and women much like all others. Mother Sioux as intervening figure in the education of this Walter Raleigh for the 20th century, stimulates in her tyro, during Aesop's finger operation, a significant reaction: "I'd always thought that Indians hid their feelings, that they were braver and more stoical than white folks, but the truth was that Mother Sioux was unhinged... (p.56). Coming "from a race of hunters and warriors" (p.36), this "chubby Indian squaw" (p.33) was "steady, diligent, silent" (p.36). These are Walt's very qualities that Auster implicitly emphasizes in those last pages of the novel dedicated to the narrator's openness to chance and fiction, including his decision to leave the box containing Mr Vertigo to his nephew, Daniel Quinn. As chance would have it, this is the name of the detective-story writer of "City of Glass", the first part of the *The New York Trilogy*, who becomes the protagonist for a further author, Paul Auster - who, in turn, becomes a character within the story.

Much like Walt at the end of his registered experiences, the Quinn of "City of Glass" ends his days alone in a room, with his clothes off, implying that he has got rid of an older self, mysteriously fed, sitting at a desk and sticking to diminishing language exercises. Unlike Quinn, however, Walt may choose an ending for his narrative: at a point where he is notably wiser than he was before, where his development from ignorance to knowledge leads him to depend only upon himself for the construction of his identity. In *Mr. Vertigo* Auster reaches out to the reader by denying any one locus of specific meaning other than the strategy of control designed to keep self-assertion within fictional bounds, within the uses of language.

From the boy who could fly to the elderly man who can write, from adventurer to artist, Walt searches for a stable identity, a balance that can only be achieved when his quest comes to an end and he writes the story of his life. Auster's evaluation of Philippe Petit, the wire walker he first saw in Paris in 1971, and of his book *On the High-Wire*, can function as an appropriate synthesis of *Mr. Vertigo*: "The book... is a kind of parable, a spiritual journey in the form of a treatise.... When read carefully, the book is transformed into the story of a quest, an exemplary tale of one man's search for perfection.... It seems to me that anyone who has ever tried to do something well, anyone who has ever made personal sacrifices for an art or an idea, will have no trouble understanding what it is about" (Auster 1992:247).

When the previous self dies, Walt gives birth to himself through words.



Without death there is no resurrection; without the danger of extinction there is no self-confrontation and self-reconciliation. This penchant for extremes implies Auster's obvious fascination with the concept of balance, be it a physical phenomenon - Philippe Petit's craft - or a metaphysical one - *Mr Vertigo* (Chard - Hutchinson 1996:8). The anxiety of balance as a key component in the analysis of Walt's ordeal stresses that Auster's interrogation of postmodern subjectivity in this novel eventually presents a stable subject rather than a fluid one.

But if Auster's fiction draws on postmodern issues, it does so in such a puzzling way that it transcends the realm of any definition of the postmodern. What matters most to him, as his writing illustrates, is the foregrounding of story and narrativity, the relation between the language and the self, the strategies of representation, the act of questioning, without guaranteed results, what still tends to be taken for granted in the dislocating and displaced map of contemporary life. According to Auster, solitude, chance, hunger, disappearances, provide compelling reasons for trying to make sense of the world. There is always the need of a quest for a possible coherence, an elusive order, in the middle of the chaos of ordinary life. Otherwise, there is the possibility of succumbing to the nothingness hidden at the core.

Between the extremes of chaos and order, the dialectical dance of concepts is a quintessential Austerian act. When Walt reflects on his life and writes the book we read he reflects on the "dance" of fiction and makes us part of that reflection. In this context, a few words from Auster's essay "The Death of Sir Walter Raleigh" are worth quoting (Auster 1991: 168, 169):

"If there is such a thing as an art of living, then the man who lives life as an art will have a sense of his own beginning and his own end. And beyond that, he will know that his end is in the beginning, and that each breath he draws can only bring him nearer to that end.... Therefore Raleigh. Or the art of living as the art of death.... For the subject is not only life and death. It is death. And it is life."

Therefore, one may add, Mother Sioux. As ghost dancer, she is part of a magic ritual that circumvents imminent death. As a member of Buffalo Bill's troupe she makes a journey that "probably meant the difference between life and death" (p.74): shortly after her departure Sitting Bull was murdered and some time later the Battle of Wounded Knee took place. Therefore Philippe Petit, the wire-dancer, because "high-wire walking is not an art of death, but an art of life - and life lived to the very extreme of life. Which is to say, life that does not hide from death, but stares it straight in the face (Auster 1992:250). Therefore Walt Rawley, the writer, the ghost. Or the art of living and life as an art. Or fiction as a venture that can make the difference between life and death: fiction as a ghost dance.

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