

# Paul Auster's New Jewishness in the USA: An Analysis of *The Invention of Solitude*

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## INTRODUCTION

After World War II, Jewish-American writers like Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth introduced Jewish-immigrant experiences and created a new literary trend in American literature. However, the Jewish-immigrant milieu familiar in their novels has been lost since the late 1970s and today's Jewish American writers are far more acculturated into US society. In the younger Jewish writers, therefore, we find a different type of Jewishness, more subjective Jewishness, which Stuart Hall might classify as "the new ethnicity."

Here, I will discuss Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) in order to show what an original achievement today's Jewish American writers make through their Jewishness. Auster is a third-generation Jewish American writer and has been influenced not only by Jewish and American cultures but also by postmodernism in the 1970s and the 80s and the French literature he majored in.

*The Invention of Solitude*, his first novel, reveals his fundamental attitude toward writing under these influences.

## AUSTER'S NEW JEWISHNESS

In this book, Auster openly and humorously declares his distance from Jewish customs. In the first section of the book, "Portrait of an Invisible Man," he reveals a much stronger affinity for baseball, as he also does in the second section of the book, "The Book of Memory." In this section Auster describes himself as A., and A. associates a solemn Jewish religious custom with a flippant reaction in baseball:

In his own Jewish childhood, A. can remember confusing the last words of the Passover Seder, "Next year in Jerusalem," with the ever-hopeful refrain of disappointed fandom, "Wait till next year," as if the one were a commentary on the other: to win the pennant was to enter the promised land (117).

The Passover is the celebration of freedom to commemorate Israel's deliverance from the enslavement in Egypt. To pledge "Next year in Jerusalem" at the end of this festival, therefore,

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expresses their hope to end their hardship as a race in exile. Equating such serious Jewish wishes with the zeal of baseball-fans could easily involve profanity but Auster is so innocent that he only produces laughter.

Ultimately, Auster seems to emphasize that he is so detached from the Jewish traditions which connect Jews to the notion of nation and race, that he feels neither sympathy nor antipathy towards them. Paradoxically, however, he must know Jewish customs enough to depict his distance from them so humorously as he did. The highlighting of his Americanization is only achieved by deconstructing the traditional Jewishness for his personal and original purpose.

#### AUSTER'S DECONSTRUCTION OF OLD JEWISHNESS

Auster deconstructs old Jewishness more intentionally in the murder case in which his father's mother killed her husband. In order to explain this case, Auster quotes an article from a newspaper of those days and ascribes the murder to common causes for marriage troubles, such as trouble with money and the husband's extramarital relationship. In his grandmother's confession, however, it is casually mentioned that she spoke almost no English. It intimates that she was suffering from a typical first generation immigrant experience – helpless isolation in a strange land. Her husband must have been the only person she could rely on in the US and when he betrayed her, she could have been easily driven to murder in despair. Still, Auster completely avoids associating the murder with her immigrant experience.

Likewise Auster does not consider that the case might have been easily dismissed simply because it was concerned only with Jews – outsiders in the Anglo-Saxon US society at that time. Nor does he relate his father's inner isolation, his submission to the caprice of life and his holding on to money as a safety net, to his family's poverty and isolation caused by the verdict, though all of these characteristics have long been treated as typical Jewish Diaspora traits by many Jewish American writers.

Auster, therefore, does not describe his father objectively enough to present him as he was. Though Auster claims that he wrote about his father to remember him, he analyzes his father's Jewish experience from his own point of view and searches for his own life, as Michel Contat points out in the interview: "You give birth to him [your father] by writing about him and at the same time you give birth to yourself as a writer" (182).

In fact, when his father died on Jan. 15, 1979, Auster needed to re-establish his life. He was in a terrible plight as he recounted in the interview with Adam Begley: "I had run into a wall with my work. I was blocked and miserable, my marriage was falling apart. I had no money. I was finished" (53). When his father's money allowed him to concentrate on writing, he seized the opportunity not only to write about his father but also to rethink his own life as a writer.

A more obvious example of Auster's deconstruction of old Jewishness for the search of his own identity is observed in the way he handles the Jewish father-son relationship. Stephen Fredman points out, "Within the masculine genealogy of this text, all of A.'s hopes for regeneration are transferred to his son" (29). *The Invention of Solitude* actually emphasizes the heritage which Auster received from his father and his grandfather, and transmits to his own son, David. The father-son relationship in this book, however, fails to match the traditional Jewish father-son relationship, which Irving Malin describes as follows:

There is honor between fathers and sons. The father is the benevolent teacher; the son is the obedient student. ... What is remarkable is that the father-son relationship is rarely hostile (32-33).

Malin further argues that in many Jewish American novels in the earlier days: "The archetypal Jew embraces the rule of the father; the archetypal American rebels against the father. Two mythic patterns clash: in this clash our writers find tense, symbolic meaning" (35).

Contrary to these earlier cases, Auster is neither benevolent nor hostile to his father. He loves his father enough to record his father's life for his father's sake but he has to declare: "Earliest memory: his absence" (20).

Consequently, the apparent structure of the Jewish father-son relationship in this book emphasizes Auster's lack of heritage and his need to search for his own identity for himself. In "The Book of Memory," Auster is convinced: "When the father dies, ... the son becomes his own father and his own son" (81). It is because he has to make his own father – his mental leader – by searching for a meaningful life for himself as well as to make his own son – his mental heir – to check if his life is really worthy enough to hand it down to the next generation.

#### THE MEANING OF "THE INVENTION OF SOLITUDE"

Auster thus deconstructs traditional meanings of Jewishness in the search for his own identity. And this deed is related to the book's title, "the invention of solitude."

In the East European Jewry, Hassidism made much of telling old stories and anecdotes in its teaching. And both Auster's father and his grandfather on his mother's side were good at storytelling. Auster nevertheless cannot inherit their talent of storytelling as it was because both of them used their ability to retreat from the reality or to deceive themselves. Especially, his father was characterized by turning his back on the real world in order to retreat into himself, which Auster regards as "solitary."

Such a "solitary" state isolates one's mind and keeps one from looking into oneself in any relation with other people.

On the other hand, Auster does not attach any negative connotations to the term "solitude" as he asserts in the interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory: "you don't begin to understand your connection to others until you are alone. And the more intensely you are alone, the more deeply you plunge into a state of solitude, the more deeply you feel that connection" (315).

"Solitude" isolates one only physically and extends one's mind deeply and widely into the world.

In "The Book of Memory," for example, A. visits a great artist, S. in his extremely small room and finds "an entire universe" (89) in it. It is what Auster aims to do as a writer. Though he confines himself in his room to write, he tries to be connected to the outside world as widely as possible.

To invent meaningful solitude as a writer, he is required to look into his innermost mind and reconsider his background. This is why, in *The Invention of Solitude*, he adopted an autobiographical form. And yet, in order to be connected to the outside world, he deconstructs his father's Jewish experience by means of his acquired elements such as postmodernism, American experiences, American literature and French literature, and completely generalizes it. Thus, towards the end of the second part of the book, he mixes Jewish and non-Jewish materials intentionally and ostentatiously. And when he is caught in a prison of hopelessness and finds his sole consolation in his son's image, he soon extends his son's image into a more generalized image: "And not just his son, but any son, any daughter, any child of any man or woman" (156).

#### THE EVALUATION OF AUSTER'S JEWISHNESS

Auster does not use Jewishness as Bellow, Malamud, and Roth did. Instead, he deconstructs it with other elements he has as a member of a younger Jewish American generation. Thus, Jewishness seems to be, in one way, less important to him than to Bellow, Malamud and Roth. Besides, Kobayashi-Kenji explains that one of the postmodern characteristics is the intentional intrusion and transgression of genres and borders without defining or limiting anything in the intrinsic instability of

the contemporary culture<sup>1</sup>. Auster's free and unique usage of multiple elements, therefore, could be easily labeled as a typical postmodern technique, and not as a Jewish characteristic.

Auster also insists in the interview with Komazawa-Toshiki that he should be defined, if anything, as an American writer<sup>2</sup>. Likewise, in the interview with Mark Irwin, Auster agrees with Irwin's opinion that "part of the American-ness of poetry and the novel is 'to let everything in' as opposed to the more European notion 'to control it'" (334). Then he asserts, "I feel that I want to stay open to everything, that there's nothing that can't be an influence" (334).

Hence, it would be safe to say that Auster's Jewishness is only one of many affiliations that make him a very American writer. Yet, it is because of his Jewishness in combination with his other aspects that he could produce a unique and original contemporary American work. Actually, there is something more assertive in Auster's Jewishness than Henry Bial finds in his assessment of recent plays by Jewish American writers and producers: "Quite frequently, what a spectator identifies as Jewishness is equivocal, affective, and not exclusively Jewish" (18). If it is equivocal, it is completely up to the audience (or the reader) to recognize it as Jewish, as Bial himself admits: "Knowing the codes, reading Jewish, can be a way to affirm one's membership in an imagined community of American Jews" (20). In contrast, Auster's Jewishness is indispensable in creating his original literary world and it cannot be ignored if we are to appreciate his works to the full. And this is probably why Dennis Barone points out the substantial presence of Auster's Jewishness as follows: "It is interesting to note that while Auster does not provide an explicit centrality for Judaism in his work, the Jewish tradition is ever present" (23).

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<sup>1</sup> Kobayashi-Kenji, 275.

<sup>2</sup> Komazawa-Toshiki, 107.