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IMAGES OF THE HERMETIC ROOM IN THE NOVELS OF PAUL AUSTER

Among literary critics there are some who have noticed Auster's fascination with place and spatiality. Tim Woods, for example, calls this preoccupation a specifically postmodern phenomenon and he classifies spatiality as an additional "S" word, together with subjectivity, sexuality, silence, and sublimity.¹ Auster's fiction frequently foregrounds spatial loci: small apartments located in big cities, locked rooms, confined space of a writer's study, and other circumscribed spaces and places in which his characters dwell. His fiction pivots on the consequences of confinement or the spatial closure the protagonists in his novels experience as well as on the effects of openness on human consciousness. On the one hand, Auster's characters either choose confinement or are doomed to end up in constricted spaces. On the other hand, they seem to be either fascinated with open and vast space of the American continent or haunted by it, which eventually leads to their epiphany or demise. As Dennis Barone has aptly stated, Auster's narratives "often move from closed spaces to wanderings, and this movement parallels characters' understanding of actions and their consequences. Characters are paradoxically most free when confined and least free when openly rambling."²

As far as the experience of spatial closure is concerned, the most recurrent image in Auster's fiction, however, is that of a room and it appears in

¹ Tim Woods, "Looking for Signs in the Air: Urban Space and the Postmodern in *In the Country of Last Things*," in: Paul Auster, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), p. 138.

² Dennis Barone, "Introduction: Paul Auster and the Postmodern American Novel," in: *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, ed. Dennis Barone (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p. 12.

most of his novels. It happens that Auster's characters are quite frequently writers and their profession requires spending long stretches of time within the four walls of their studies. More often than not these rooms are presented as a location with a particular *genius loci*, or "the spirit of place," thanks to its spatial characteristics. According to Botond Bognar, "[s]pirit of place,' or *genius loci*, arises from the special character or synesthetic quality of a particular locality," and it is evoked by various significant aspects which, among many, include spatial structures as well as topographical patterns and textures of a place.³

Firstly, it is worth mentioning that the term "topography" explicitly refers to the delineation of one's locality or "situatedness" of somebody or something. According to *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, "topography" is not only a detailed description, delineation or representation on a map of the features of place, but also the identification of the locality or local distribution of a thing.⁴ Secondly, when speaking of textures of a place, it is also vital to point out that "[a] place's 'texture' [...] calls direct attention to the paradoxical nature of place."⁵ As Adams, Hoelscher and Till have argued, texture does not merely mean a superficial layer of a place, which is one of many definitions of this word. On the contrary, by the very complex meaning of the word "texture," which denotes "any structure having the appearance or consistency of woven fabric, a tissue, a web" as well as "constitution, distinctive nature or quality resulting from composition, or even mental disposition,"⁶ it suggests inherent complexity which is created by bringing together many threads employed in its constitution: "[T]he shape, feel, and texture of a place each provides a glimpse into the processes, structures, spaces, and histories that went into its making."⁷ Last but not least, spatial structures must be taken into account since space is one of the basic constituents of a place. Being a potentiality in itself, space corroborates its spaciousness or capacity to contain that which is being held within its grasp. Thus, space, or more poignantly the spatiality of a place, can generate ample meanings and connotations.

What is the potentiality of space as far as the image of a room is concerned? The rooms in Auster's novels are always similar: most often tiny and cell-like,

³ Botond Bognar, "A Phenomenological Approach to Architecture and Its Teaching in the Design Studio," in: *Dwelling, Place & Environment*, eds. David Seamon and Robert Mugerauer (Malbar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 1985), p. 188.

⁴ *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. Lesley Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), Vol. 2, p. 3341.

⁵ *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies*, eds. Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoelscher and Karen E. Till (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. xiii.

⁶ *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 3265.

⁷ *Textures of Place*, p. xiii.

profoundly claustrophobic, bare or completely empty; and, more often than not, they are locked. In those rooms space appears to close in on the characters that either dwell in them or just enter them for shorter or longer stretches of time. Paradoxically, the rooms being claustrophobic, Auster's protagonists do not seem to suffer from claustrophobia (which is fear of enclosed space) but rather experiencing claustrophilia (which is love of being confined in small places). The very constriction of space is guaranteed by the hermeticity of the rooms presented as they are inescapably walled territories, which augments their confining influence. The rooms are delineated as peculiar enclaves of spatial closure which is both of physical and mental nature.

The hermeticity of the room apparently seems to suggest a certain spatial seal or even a particular concealment of the room's space as well as of one's consciousness within its walls. However, it is pivotal to acknowledge that the hermeticity of the room is not smoothly opaque and impermeable. Depending on which perspective one assumes, the hermeticity of the room may also appear rather porous in its character. Such a permeable, or to a certain extent open, structure of the room is experienced from within the room, for it is always connected with a body of a person staying within its four walls. Thus, *within* the room lies the porous structure of its space. Moreover, it lies within because hermeticity accordingly lies in the nature of the room and does not constitute its layer. Furthermore, its porous character indicates that the hermeticity does not merely mean closure and confinement but also a specific disclosure of its substance or partial opening of its space. Such dual essence of the room's hermeticity is corroborated by the meaning of the word "hermetic."

On the one hand, one of the meanings of the word signifies something airtight, sealed, and protected from outside agencies, but, on the other hand, it also means an adjective pertaining to the god Hermes, the son of Zeus and Maia in the Greek mythology, the messenger of the gods.⁸

Swiftly moving Hermes is at once "the God of motion, communication, guidance, and barter." He acts as a guide to human souls on their journey into the underworld and yet is prone to mislead these souls by his cunning and guile. [...] Associated with the heaps of stones that mark crossroads and territorial boundaries in ancient Greece [...] Hermes is also the god of roads and of wayfarers.⁹

Being a god of intersections, the "hermetic" essence of this deity appears to lie in its being "always *out there*," resonating with a mode of dwell-

⁸ *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. 1, p. 1223.

⁹ Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press: 1993), p. 137.

ing experienced in its very outwardness.¹⁰ As Rafael López-Pedraza argues, "Hermes permeates the whole world because of his possibility of making connections."¹¹ This capacity for linking the outer with the inner is what closely relates to the twofold nature of the hermeticity of the room which, thanks to a body within its walls, joins the inside of the room with its outside. Furthermore, while speaking of two modes of dwelling, namely hestial and hermetic, Edward Casey identifies the latter one with ec-centric inhabiting which consists in "far-out view," in outwardness and exteriority.¹²

The preoccupation with possibilities of confined space and of surpassing its limitations by transgressing its physicality lies at the center of Auster's fiction and is explicitly associated with the image of the room. The seminal text in which the motif of the room is employed is *The Invention of Solitude*, and more predominantly its second section entitled *The Book of Memory*.

This penchant for narrow spaces, where the spirit can project itself against the walls [...] makes the room a kind of mental uterus, site of a second birth. In this enclosure the subject gives birth, in essence, to himself. From mere biological existence he now attains spiritual life. The confinement transforms him into a voluntary castaway, a Robinson Crusoe run aground in the middle of the city, wedged into a tiny fissure of the urban habitat.¹³

The protagonist of *The Book of Memory* is A., who stays in his small room and writes, trying to inhabit the space of the room not only with his body but also with his thoughts. It is as though he was to fight the emptiness of the place with his mind's creativity and transgress its confinement by this "spiritual work."¹⁴ On the one hand, the experience of being walled out means constriction of inhabited space, which can also be described as a *centripetal* movement of the room's space, by which it is meant that space appears to close in on A. On the other hand, staying within the walls of the room simultaneously generates the feeling of crossing the room's material boundaries because its space is also governed by its *centrifugal* force, which signifies that space seems to open up since the room changes from a peculiar microcosm into a macrocosm, the very Universe itself.

¹⁰ Casey, *Getting Back Into Place*, p. 137.

¹¹ Rafael López-Pedraza, *Hermes and His Children* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1977), p. 8. Quoted in: Casey, *Getting Back Into Place*, p. 137.

¹² Casey, *Getting Back Into Place*, pp. 133–138.

¹³ Pascal Bruckner, "Paul Auster, or The Heir Intestate," in: *Beyond the Red Notebook*, p. 28.

¹⁴ Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), p. 77.

Rather, a feeling of doors being shut, of locks being turned. It is a hermetic season, a long moment of inwardness. The outer world, the tangible world of materials and bodies, has come to seem no more than an emanation of his mind. [...] A feeling of having been locked up, and at the same time of being able to walk through walls.¹⁵

This quotation reveals the twofold meaning of the word "hermetic." As long as "hermetic" is experienced from the outside, it stays opaque and impermeable, but the moment one enters the hermeticity of a place, it changes its essence. The hermeticity of the room as encountered from the inside transports its dweller to its center, within the boundaries of oneself, at the same time thrusting the person outside the limits of the room and causing the person to be able to expatiate beyond its walls. Thus, the body within the room corroborates the porous structure of its hermeticity because thanks to the body within the room its space becomes inhabited or lived. "'Where' is never a there, a region over against us, isolated and objective. 'Where' is always part of us and we part of it. It mingles with our being, so much so that place and human being are enmeshed, forming a fabric that is particular, concrete and dense."¹⁶

The Book of Memory seems to commence with the image of the room and it also grows out of the very motif. One of the most frequently repeated sentences in the text is one of Pascal's thoughts, namely: "All the unhappiness of man stems from one thing only: that he is incapable of staying quietly in his room,"¹⁷ as though such constriction of space were to offer a way to happiness or transcendence. Furthermore, different rooms are presented in the novel: rooms of different writers and rooms depicted in various novels, poems, and paintings. Auster presents the rooms reproduced in the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh and Vermeer, the rooms of real writers, for example the room into which Emily Dickinson retired, and in which she produced her whole *oeuvre*, and finally Hölderlin's living in his tower, which supposedly was built by a carpenter called Zimmer. These last two instances are highly significant as towards the end of their lives both Dickinson and Hölderlin left their rooms more and more rarely, which altered those places into uterine symbols of their life spaces, although the reasons for staying within their rooms were different for those two poets; the creative space of the room of Emily Dickinson and the more confining space of Hölderlin's tower, which he left more and more rarely because of his illness towards the end of his life. In both situations, however, it was the space of the room which encompassed spatial territory of their Universe and became gradually transformed into it.

¹⁵ Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 78.

¹⁶ Joseph Grange, "Place, Body and Situation," in: *Dwelling, Place & Environment*, p. 71.

¹⁷ Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 83.

Another character in the novel is S., A.'s friend from the past, who used to live "in a space so small that at first it seemed to defy you, to resist being entered."¹⁸ S.'s room became changed into a cloak in which he was living, sleeping, and breathing. It came to represent a diaphanous texture through which S.'s life could be seen and read, and in which it was encompassed and embodied.

For there was an entire universe in that room, a miniature cosmology that contained all that is most vast, most distant, most unknowable. It was a shrine, hardly bigger than a body, in praise of all that exists beyond the body: the representation of one man's inner world even to the slightest detail. S. had literally managed to surround himself with the things that were inside him. The room he lived in was a dream space, and its walls were like the skin of some second body around him, as if his own body had been transformed into a mind, a breathing instrument of pure thought. This was the womb, the belly of the whale, the original site of the imagination.¹⁹

The room becomes transformed into a corporeal framework, a body, and the body metamorphoses into the body's mind. Here the room happens to be incorporated and assimilated into the fabric of embodied existence; the room comes to be S.'s second body. This metamorphosis is possible thanks to the porous structure of the room's space and its being inhabited, which renders its outward and inward movement within its texture possible. As Bernd Jager has argued the body does not merely occupy space but it generates it, thus allowing for its transformations.²⁰ It brings us again to the importance of the body that dwells within the room, which renders the two-fold meaning of the room's hermeticity possible, and thanks to which its porous structure comes to be comprehended.

Another novel which is filled with images of rooms is Auster's *The New York Trilogy*. It consists of three novels whose titles are respectively *City of Glass*, *Ghosts* and *The Locked Room*. The title of the last one is transparent enough but it is in *Ghosts* that readers can find the most elaborate descriptions of the room and the consequences of staying within its walls. The protagonist of the novel is a detective called Blue, who is hired by a man named White, and whose task is to watch another one, called Black. A small studio apartment is rented for Blue and he is to keep an eye on Black, who lives in the building opposite Blue's. As it turns out, Black spends most of his

¹⁸ Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 89.

¹⁹ Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 89.

²⁰ Bernd Jager, "Body, House and City: The Intertwinings of Embodiment, Inhabitation and Civilization," in: *Dwelling, Place & Environment*, p. 215.

time within the four walls of his room writing, reading, eating and sleeping. Only rarely does he leave the room to wend his way through the streets of New York, which becomes a chance for Blue to do the same, the thing which he does very eagerly. It takes place very seldom, however, and Blue regards the confinement of his room as more and more intolerable. The spatial constriction of his life space is unbearable to him and “[f]or the first time in his life, he finds that he has been thrown back on himself, with nothing to grab hold of, nothing to distinguish one moment from the next.”²¹ Together with this spatial compression of his world within the room comes the reduction of life’s pace, and the emptiness of Blue’s room seems to swallow his body and his mind as though the hermeticity of the room was literal and he had no air to breathe, nothing which would render him alive.

Strangely enough, the novel itself is mainly set within the room’s walls as if life could only take place in the room. The novel commences with Blue entering the room and it ends with his leaving the confining structure of the room. Readers know next to nothing of what happens before Blue’s spatial, or maybe platial, adventure within the room and completely nothing of what happens after he leaves. In this case, however, Blue is forced to take up this stationary position and he does not welcome the shrinking of his life space. Here, the room’s texture loses its porous character as it seems to be entirely devoid of life which is always brought within the borders of the room with the body of its dweller, or more poignantly with flesh rather than body, which would imply its sensuous aspect allowing for it to experience space surrounding it.²² Blue, however, is merely stationed in the room to observe Black and thus he does not really inhabit its space, or does not want to inhabit it. It is no longer space that attacks Blue through his eyes only, but space that encroaches on him from all directions and enters his body, or his flesh, thus menacing its integrity. The space of the room becomes aching void for him and it threatens his mental stability. What finally happens is a figurative explosion of the person confined within the room; for Blue leaves it to enter the room of his antagonist, Black, where the former one apparently kills the latter. The hermeticity of the room may be treated literally as its spatial structure has such confining impact on Blue that he seems to be unable to breathe or live within its walls.

Another example of the room depicted in Auster’s fiction is a writer’s study which is always presented as a particular location. As it has already

²¹ Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), p. 143.

²² Grange, “Place, Body and Situation,” p. 72. Grange uses the word “flesh” instead of “body” to emphasize the sensuousness of the human body, its feeling and housing the environment in its being, which stands in clear opposition to “body” as suggesting its density and mass. The use of this word also implies the porous character of the room’s hermeticity.

been mentioned, more often than not his characters are writers themselves and the rooms into which they retire to write appear in almost all of Auster's novels, for example, *Leviathan*, *The Book of Illusions*, *The New York Trilogy* and *Oracle Night*, which is Auster's last publication. The protagonist of *Oracle Night* is Sidney Orr, a thirty-four-year-old novelist recovering from a near-fatal illness. He spends his days walking and writing, these two activities being his main occupation. He mostly writes in his workroom which is "hardly bigger than a closet in there — just enough space for a desk, a chair, and a miniature bookcase with four narrow shelves."²³ The moment Orr enters the room and sits at his desk, he feels "like someone who had come home from a long and difficult journey, an unfortunate traveler who had returned to claim his rightful place in the world."²⁴ The room becomes presented as the authentic territory where happiness can be attained, where with the constriction of physical space the writer is granted freedom to wander, to expatiate beyond the walls of the room and even further. Such freedom within the room is indubitably connected with the process of writing which grants the writer a particular transcendence beyond the walls of the room.

This is possible thanks to the intertwining of the physical space of the room and the space of writing or the space of literature which is always connected with a certain opening. Through this opening (or disclosure) the writer may transgress the hermeticity of the room and figuratively disappear, which causes his appearance somewhere else, in a different place. Paradoxically, when Orr's wife comes back home and looks for her husband in his workroom, she does not see him in there as though he were not within the room. On the one hand, writing within the room may seem to be an ordinary activity; but in Auster's novels it is always associated with a peculiar spatial phenomenon which again moves us to the porous character of the hermeticity of the room. Here, it is this which enables the writer to move beyond its walls, and it should not astound us that the writer retires into the room's spatial confinement to be capable of fighting its hermetic structure.

The rooms presented in Auster's novels stand for a particular spatial experience which is strictly related to their hermeticity. The very hermetic image of the room, however, may be comprehended in its twofold manner in relation to the dual meaning of the word "hermetic." Such a spatial, or platial, experience depends on the feeling or perception of the person, or the body, who stays within the room. On the one hand, the locked room may either be felt as confining when the person experiences it from the outside, or from the inside, when the person does not want to be there and is forced

²³ Paul Auster, *Oracle Night* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003), p. 11.

²⁴ Auster, *Oracle Night*, p. 11.

to remain within the walls of the room. On the other hand, this very room may be experienced as welcoming and opened, or opening in its structure, when the person experiences the room from within, or when he or she willingly retires into the room and mingles with its space.

Magdalena Słonka

Obrazy hermetycznego pokoju w powieściach Paula Austera

Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest tematowi pokoju, który jest jednym z ważniejszych motywów twórczości Paula Austera. Pokój potraktowany jest tutaj jako zamknięta przestrzeń, w której bohaterowie Austera spędzają dobrowolnie, lub nie, dużo czasu, co z kolei wiąże się z ich odseparowaniem od świata zewnętrznego. Artykuł jest próbą spojrzenia na hermetyczność przestrzeni zamkniętego pokoju i jego podwójny aspekt przez zwrócenie uwagi na to, jak osoby (ich ciała) przebywające wewnątrz zmieniają charakter tej przestrzeni. Bohaterowie Austera to często ludzie pióra zamykający się w czterech ścianach, aby skupić się na pisaniu. Ten proces również otwiera ową przestrzeń i sprawia, że ci, którzy są w niej zamknięci, mogą wyjść „na zewnątrz”. Paradoksalnie rzecz ujmując, to zamknięcie powoduje otwarcie: hermetyczna przestrzeń może być przestrzenią otwartą.

Magdalena Słonka

Bilder des Hermetische Zimmers in Paul Austers Romanen

Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Artikel ist dem Zimmer als einem der wichtigsten Motive in Paul Austers Werken gewidmet. Das Zimmer erscheint hier als ein geschlossener Raum, in dem Austers Helden, freiwillig oder unwillkürlich, sehr viel Zeit verbringen, was dann ihre Absonderung von der Außenwelt zur Folge hat. Der Autor ergründet den Hermetismus des geschlossenen Raumes und dessen doppelten Aspekt, indem er den Leser darauf aufmerksam macht, wie die sich in dem Zimmer befindenden Personen (deren Körper) den Charakter des Raumes verändern. Zu Austers Helden werden oft die in den eigenen vier Wänden geschlossenen Schriftsteller, die sich auf dem Schreiben konzentrieren wollen. Dank dem Prozess wird ein neuer Raum geöffnet, so dass die dort Geschlossenen „nach außen“ dürfen. Eine Verschließung hat paradox eine Eröffnung zur Folge: ein hermetischer Raum kann auch ein offener Raum werden.