

PAUL AUSTER



Paul Auster was born in Newark, New Jersey, on 3 February 1947. A poet, translator and film director, he is the author of numerous novels, screenplays and works of non-fiction. Through his rich and unexpectedly dream-like prose, Paul Auster is widely regarded by critics as one of America's greatest living writers. He is best known for his three experimental detective stories, *The New York Trilogy* (*City of Glass*, 1985; *Ghosts*, 1986; *The Locked Room*, 1986). He lives in Brooklyn, New York with his wife, the author Siri Hustvedt.

Reading with Flaubert

It didn't take me long to get the hang of the wheelchair. There were a few bumps on the first day, but once I learned how to tilt the chair at the proper angle when we went up and down curbs, things went fairly smoothly. Effing was exceedingly light, and pushing him around caused little strain on my arms. In other respects, however, our excursions were rather difficult for me. As soon as we got outside, Effing would begin jabbing his stick into the air, asking in a loud voice what object he was pointing at. As soon as I told him, he would insist that I describe it for him. Garbage cans, shop windows, doorways: he wanted me to give him a precise account of these things, and if I couldn't muster the phrases swiftly enough to satisfy him, he would explode in anger. "Dammit, boy," he would say, "use the eyes in your head! I can't see a bloody thing, and here you're spouting drivel about 'your average lamppost' and 'perfectly ordinary manhole covers.' No two things are alike, you fool, any bumpkin knows that. I want to see what we're looking at, goddamit, I want you to make things stand out for me!" It was humiliating to be scolded like that in the middle of the street, standing there as the old man lashed out at me, having to take it as people turned their heads to watch the uproar. Once or twice, I was tempted just to walk away and leave him there, but the fact was that Effing was not entirely wrong. I was not doing a very good job. I realized that I had never acquired the habit of looking closely at things, and now that I was being asked to do it, the results were dreadfully inadequate.

Until then, I had always had a penchant for generalizing, for seeing the similarities between things rather than their differences. Now I was being plunged into a world of particulars, and the struggle to evoke them in words, to summon up the immediate sensual data, presented a challenge I was ill prepared for. To get what he wanted, Effing should have hired Flaubert to push him around the streets – but even Flaubert worked slowly, sometimes laboring for hours just to get a single sentence right. I not only had to describe things accurately, I had to do it within a matter of seconds. More than anything else, I hated the inevitable comparisons with Pavel Shum. Once, when I was having a particularly rough time of it, Effing went on about his departed friend for several minutes, describing him as a master of the poetic phrase, a peerless inventor of apt and stunning images, a stylist whose words could miraculously reveal the palpable truth of objects. "And to think," Effing said, "English wasn't even his first language." That was the only time I ever talked back to him on the subject, but I felt so wounded by his remark that I couldn't resist. "If you want another language," I said, "I'll be happy to oblige you. How about Latin? I'll talk to you in Latin from now on if you like. Better yet, I'll talk to you in Pig Latin. You shouldn't have any trouble under-

standing that.” It was a stupid thing to say, and Effing quickly put me in my place. “Shut up and talk, boy,” he said. “Tell me what the clouds look like. Give me every cloud in the western sky, every one as far as you can see.”

In order to do what Effing asked, I had to learn how to keep myself separate from him. The essential thing was not to feel burdened by his commands, but to transform them into something I wanted to do for myself. There was nothing inherently wrong with the activity, after all. If regarded in the proper way, the effort to describe things accurately was precisely the kind of discipline that could teach me what I most wanted to learn: humility, patience, rigor. Instead of doing it merely to discharge an obligation, I began to consider it as a spiritual exercise, a process of training myself how to look at the world as if I were discovering it for the first time. What do you see? And if you see, how do you put it into words? The world enters us through our eyes, but we cannot make sense of it until it descends into our mouths. I began to appreciate how great that distance was, to understand how far a thing must travel in order to get from the one place to the other. In actual terms, it was no more than two or three inches, but considering how many accidents and losses could occur along the way, it might just as well have been a journey from the earth to the moon.

My first attempts with Effing were dismally vague, mere shadows flitting across a blurred background. I had seen these things before, I told myself, and how could there be any difficulty in describing them? A fire hydrant, a taxi cab, a rush of steam pouring up from the pavement – they were deeply familiar to me, and I felt I knew them by heart. But that did not take into account the mutability of those things, the way they changed according to the force and angle of the light, the way their aspect would be altered by what was happening around them: a person walking by, a sudden gust of wind, an odd reflection. Everything was constantly in flux, and though two bricks in a wall might strongly resemble each other, they could never be construed as identical. More to the point, the same brick was never really the same. It was wearing out, imperceptibly crumbling under the effects of the atmosphere, the cold, the heat, the storms that attacked it, and eventually, if one could watch it over the course of centuries, it would no longer be there. All inanimate things were disintegrating, all living things were dying. My head would start to throb whenever I thought of this, imagining the furious and hectic motions of molecules, the unceasing explosions of matter, the collisions, the chaos boiling under the surface of all things. As Effing had warned me at our first meeting: take nothing for granted. From casual indifference, I passed through a stage of intense alarm. My descriptions became overly exact, desperately trying to capture every possible nuance of what I was seeing, jumbling up details in a mad scramble to leave nothing out. The words burst from my mouth like machine-gun bullets, a staccato of rapid-fire

assault. Effing constantly had to tell me to slow down, complaining that he couldn’t keep up with me. The problem was less in my delivery than in my general approach. I was piling too many words on top of each other, and rather than reveal the thing before us, they were in fact obscuring it, burying it under an avalanche of subtleties and geometric abstractions. The important thing to remember was that Effing was blind. My job was not to exhaust him with lengthy catalogues, but to help him see things for himself.

In the end, the words didn’t matter. Their task was to enable him to apprehend the objects as quickly as possible, and in order to do that, I had to make them disappear the moment they were pronounced. It took me weeks of hard work to simplify my sentences, to learn how to separate the extraneous from the essential. I discovered that the more air I left around a thing, the happier the results, for that allowed Effing to do the crucial work on his own: to construct an image on the basis of a few hints, to feel his own mind traveling toward the thing I was describing for him. Disgusted by my early performances, I took to practicing when I was alone, lying in bed at night, for example, and going around the objects in the room, seeing if I couldn’t get any better at it.

The harder I worked, the more serious I became about what I was doing. I no longer saw it as an aesthetic activity but as a moral one, and I began to be less irritated by Effing’s criticisms, wondering if his impatience and dissatisfaction could not eventually serve some higher purpose. I was a monk seeking illumination, and Effing was my hair shirt, the whip I flayed myself with. I don’t think there was any question that I improved, but that does not mean I was ever entirely satisfied with my efforts. The demands of words are too great for that; one meets with failure too often to exult in the occasional success. As time went on, Effing became more tolerant of my descriptions, but I can’t say whether that meant they were really any closer to what he wanted. Perhaps he had given up hope, or perhaps he was beginning to lose interest. It was difficult for me to know. In the end, it could be that he was simply getting used to me.

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