

The American Waste: A New Take on the Conquest of the West in Paul Auster's Novel *Travels in the Scriptorium*

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Abstract

The subject of the article is the 2006 novel *Travels in the Scriptorium* by Paul Auster, which contains an embedded story, presenting the alternative history of the USA. The article aims to demonstrate that Auster's novel offers a revision of two essential myths of the American nation. The precise moment in the history of the USA that Auster's novel reinvents is the time before the Mexican War and before taking over the Southwest and California. The Mexican War and its political consequences marked the transition of the USA from a republic upholding its libertarian and progressive ideals to an invading imperial power. The shift in the American policy toward its neighboring nations and peoples is reflected in Auster's novel in the presentation of the westward expansion as a brutal invasion. Auster's novel heavily revises the two formative myths of the American state, the myth of the West and the "errand in the wilderness," with Manifest Destiny as its later incarnation justifying the imperialist mission. The wilderness itself is divested of spiritual significance, desacralized, as the Alien Territories are converted into the arena of carnage and indiscriminate slaughter. It is unreservedly sacrificed to the interests of the emerging imperialist enterprise, which is nothing less than the ultimate consequence of the original Puritan venture—the taming of the wilderness and the creation of a model Christian state for the rest of the world to admire.

Keywords: Alternative history, counterfactual, embedded narrative, the errand into the wilderness, American specialness, the myth of the West.

Resumen

El presente artículo gira en torno a la novela *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006) de Paul Auster, en la que se narra una historia alternativa de los Estados Unidos. El artículo pretende demostrar que la novela de Auster ofrece una revisión de dos mitos esenciales de la nación norteamericana. El momento preciso de la historia de los Estados Unidos que reinventa la novela de Auster es la época anterior a la Guerra de Estados Unidos-México y antes de que se produjera la anexión del suroeste y de California. La Guerra de Estados Unidos-México y sus consecuencias políticas marcaron la transición de los EE.UU. desde una república que defendía sus ideales libertarios y progresistas a una potencia imperial invasora. El cambio de la política estadounidense con respecto a las naciones y pueblos vecinos se refleja en la novela de Auster al presentar la expansión hacia el oeste como una invasión brutal. La novela de Auster revisa en gran medida los dos mitos formativos del estado estadounidense: el mito del Oeste y la "misión en el desierto", con el Destino Manifiesto como su encarnación posterior que justifica la misión imperialista. La propia naturaleza salvaje es despojada de su significado espiritual, desacralizada, a medida que los Territorios Foráneos se convierten en una arena para la carnicería y la matanza indiscriminadas. Esta naturaleza salvaje se sacrifica sin reservas en aras de los intereses de la empresa imperialista emergente, la cual es nada más y nada menos que la consecuencia última de la empresa puritana original: la

domesticación de la naturaleza y la creación de un estado cristiano modelo para que el resto del mundo lo admire.

Palabras clave: Historia alternativa, contrafactual, narrativa incrustada, la misión en el desierto, la singularidad americana, el mito del Oeste.

The subject of the article is the 2006 novel *Travels in the Scriptorium* by Paul Auster, which contains an embedded story presenting an alternative vision of the nineteenth-century USA. The article aims to demonstrate that by rewriting American history, Auster's text offers a revision of two essential myths of the American nation—it recasts its errand into the wilderness, and exposes the humanitarian costs of the conquest of the West. On its appearance in 2006, the novel received a cool reception. As Aliko Varvogli points out, the reviewers generally described *Travels in the Scriptorium* in escapist terms, calling it “a puzzle, a maze, or a magician's trick,” “a masterclass in postmodernist fiction,” at best concerned with “the morality of fiction-writing” (95). The criticism on this relatively recent novel is rather scant and the neglect can be demonstrated by the fact that in the volume of essays on Auster's fiction *Time, Narrative and Imagination* none tackles *Travels in the Scriptorium*.

The existing publications frequently overlook the inserted story, concentrating instead on the metafictional concerns of the novel and on its protagonist, Mr. Blank. Thus, Debra Shostak, in her article “In the Country of Missing Persons: Paul Auster's Narratives of Trauma,” states that the novel situates Mr. Blank “within the stasis of the traumatic condition, lacking memory and thus a sense of his own identity,” adding that “The exaggeratedly reflexive plot comprises the recovery, or at least the reinventing, of a history and hence some semblance of a self” (72). Jonathan Boulter in his study *Melancholy and the Archive* devotes one chapter to Auster's novels, including *Travels in the Scriptorium*, which he calls “a radical investigation into the nature of writing” (23). For Boulter, it is “a novel about the creative process” as well as “a profound meditation on the link between the creative act and guilt, guilt over the very act of imagination” (50). He gives only a passing notice to the embedded narrative, pointing out that “in a neat turn at the novel's conclusion, Auster manipulates the novel into something like a Moebius strip,” when Mr. Blank begins to read the manuscript entitled *Travels in the Scriptorium*, “apparently authored by N. R. Fanshawe, Auster's own character, the fictional author in *The Locked Room*” (Boulter 55).

Yet some articles have acknowledged the significance of the counterfactual vision of the history of the USA presented in the inserted story, discussing its larger implications. Varvogli in her brief essay recognizes its “allegorical overtones”; in her view, it is the story “about the US fighting their various alien enemies” (98). She traces the embedded narrative back to Auster's earlier novel *Oracle Night*, in which Trause, the fictitious author of the inserted story, describes it to the narrator as “a political parable,” premised on the idea “that governments always need enemies, even when they're not at war,” and when necessary, they invent them and spread the word to the public

(Varvogli 98). Countering the early reviewers, Varvogli concludes that “To claim that a country’s enemy is a discursive construct as Trause does here is to suggest also that Auster’s brand of self-reflexive metafiction is not an aesthetic game, a puzzle or a curiosity, but rather a means of interrogating the immediate, lived world of politics and power” (98).

Jesús Ángel González discusses the inserted story in his essay “‘Another History’: Alternative Americas in Paul Auster’s Fiction,” placing *Travels in the Scriptorium* alongside the 1989 novel *Moon Palace* and its near-contemporary *Man in the Dark* from 2008. González points out that, in these texts, Auster combines “historical facts with historical fiction (like the outcome of the 2000 election) to create a fictional world presented as a parallel America” (22). He acknowledges the novel’s resonance with what he calls “American myths” as well as with “American past and present history”; in his view, Auster’s critical stance is quite straightforward, for “the creation of a common enemy as an excuse for a ‘phony’ war can be related to real nineteenth-century wars with the Native Americans, Mexico or Spain, but also to the contemporary Iraqi or Afghan wars” (González 29).

Jarosław Hetman in his essay “Auster’s Alternative History” claims that Auster in *Travels in the Scriptorium* “uses the convention of an alternative history to voice his observations on what Barthes analyzes in his ‘Discourse of History,’” that is “the relation between the fictional narrative and the historical narrative” (Hetman 293). Hetman points out that in the embedded narrative, “Despite the alterations in the history of the United States, the basic ideology and the politics of the invading nations remain intact” (298). Speaking of the function of the trope of alternative history and its defamiliarizing effect, he states:

Paradoxically, fictionalizing certain historical events, instead of weakening their impact on the reader, strengthens it. This is due to the fact that the reader is no longer under such influence of the national ideology that is forced on him (if we assume that the implied reader is either an American or in a broader sense, a representative of the “Western civilization”). (Hetman 298-299)

Counterfactual visions of the historical process have proliferated in the twentieth- and twenty-first century literature, both in historiography and in the realm of fiction. The popularity of hypothetical historical narratives and fictional inversions of the past perhaps can be attributed to the postmodernist speculation on the contingency of history, the speculation that attempts to escape rigid causation of determinism and its polar opposite, arbitrariness of the idealistic philosophy, its imposition of “thought” or will on reality. In the postmodernist view, which radically questions these two explanatory frameworks, the historical process often operates through a chain of coincidences; Michel Foucault even claims that “forces operating in history [...] always appear through the singular randomness of events” (154-155).

In historical studies, counterfactualism means creating alternative outcomes of nodular events, showing other hypothetical developments resulting from what Roman Katsman calls “bifurcation points,” moments of crisis at which “events could have proceeded in different ways” (37). These unrealized possibilities had for a long time

been excluded from the prescribed scope of historical inquiry because as Foucault asserts, “we want historians to confirm our belief that the present rests upon profound intentions and immutable necessities” (155). Nevertheless, he contends that contrary to the official discourse, “the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference” (155). Such “lost” possibilities or imagined impossibilities figure largely in the strain of historiographic writing that Jeremy Black defines in *Other Pasts, Different Presents, Alternative Futures*, as “conjecturing on what did not happen in order to understand what did” (10). Fictions of alternative history are indeed predicated on counterfactual historical assumptions, as Niall Fergusson explains in *Virtual History* (8). Fergusson argues, however, that for many historians, to “imagine alternative courses of events is [...] ‘a pure myth, an extravagance of the imagination,’” and he claims that such hostile views of the various influential historians partly explain why answers to the recurring counterfactual questions “have more often been provided by writers of fiction than by historians” (7). Nevertheless, Fergusson cautions that these “products of imagination” generally “lack an empirical basis” and “rely for inspiration on hindsight” (8). In order to account for the recent surge of counterfactual narratives, Katsman states that “alternative history derives from dissatisfaction with existing history or from an inability to explain existing historical phenomena” (28). Conversely, seen in positive terms, it offers “a world view that is realized in the form of ‘fictional correction’” (Katsman 28). Referring strictly to the literary genre of alternative history, Katsman points out that in such narratives the “materialization of a certain historical possibility or impossibility” replaces existing history, and it does so overtly (36). Hence, he defines the genre as “the overt alternative realization of the possible” (Katsman 37).

In Auster’s novel *Travels in the Scriptorium*, the historical process subjected to a radical revision is the westward expansion of the American state, the inevitable consequence of its foundational myth—the Puritan errand into the wilderness. The conflict between civilization and the untamed nature, between white Christian settlers and the indigenous “heathen” population lies at the heart of the American experience. According to Adam Lloyd-Smith, “the trauma and guilt of race and slavery, along with the settlers’ terror of the Indians and the wilderness, and later perhaps some suppressed recognition of Native American genocide” are among the major themes in American literature (8). These issues are inextricably connected with the belated recognition of the waste and destruction of the natural environment concomitant with the creation of a modern industrial state on the American continent. The disastrous impact of an advanced consumer society on the natural world is by no means limited to North America. The damage is worldwide. According to Kate Rigby, we are living in the contemporary era of *ecocrisis*; she has even coined the term *ecocide* by analogy to genocide (11).

The long-standing oversight of environmental devastation and the attempt to redress its negative consequences have been the driving forces behind the emergence of the new, ecocritical perspective in the last decades of the twentieth century. Lawrence Buell in his book *The Future of Environmental Criticism* claims that this “environmental

turn in literary and cultural studies” emerged as “a reaction against the marginalization of environmental issues” (*The Future of Environmental Criticism* 62). But he cautions that despite its growing academic popularity and appeal, environmental criticism “clearly has not yet achieved the standing within the academy of such other issue-driven discourses as those of race, gender, sexuality, class, and globalization,” and it “has not developed its own distinctive methods of investigation” (Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* 129). As Buell suggests, “its merit lies in new, challenging issues, and fresh, innovative perspectives it has introduced” (*The Future of Environmental Criticism* 129).

The ecocritical approach has its roots in Romantic visions of the natural world. In her impressive study *Topographies of the Sacred* Rigby states that Romanticism as a literary movement “solicits the reader to see anew, and dwell within, the natural world” (2). Central to this conception is the project of a re-sacralization of nature. Rigby explains that

Viewed in relation to the religious traditions that have been dominant in the West, privileging a more otherworldly concept of redemption, this project looks like one of “secularization” [...] However, reconsidered in relation to the mechanistic and atomistic models of scientific rationalism, which, as Lussier has shown, the romantics were also keen to overthrow, their project appears to be a very different one: something rather more like reenchantment than secularization. (12)

She echoes here Thomas Berry, who sees humanity’s “reenchantment with the earth as a living reality” as “the condition for our rescue of the earth from the impending destruction that we are imposing upon it” (392). Berry emphasizes that in order to achieve this common goal, “we must now, in a sense, reinvent the human species within the community of life species,” and for this to happen, “Our sense of reality and of value must consciously shift from an anthropocentric to a biocentric norm of reference” (392). As Rigby puts it, “The shift to an ecocritical perspective entails the recognition that the natural world is not simply a passive object of knowledge and control, a mere resource to be bought and sold or an indifferent screen upon which we project culturally specific and socially overdetermined images of nature” (4). Likewise, Jeffrey Myers in *Converging Stories* advocates an ecocentric paradigm to displace the anthropocentrism “predominant in Western thinking about the natural world”: “Rather than positioning humanity at the center of the natural world, with human priorities as the *only* legitimate concern, ecocentricity decenters humanity and repositions us as interconnected and on an equal plane with other beings in the natural world” (Myers 9). Rigby (13) and Myers (5) point to the implicit connection between the conceptualization of nature in Western post-Cartesian dualistic thought as “as a blank screen for human projections” (Rigby 13), what Myers calls “the anthropocentric paradigm” (5), and the unprecedented environmental destruction.

Turning to the specifically American context, the mastery and exploitation of nature, “the taming of the wilderness,” was inscribed in the process of creating a civilized state on the pristine continent. John Opie and Norbert Elliot in their essay “Tracking the Elusive Jeremiad” notice the presence of “a utilitarian orientation toward

the environment” from the start; as they put it, “the natural world is merely the vehicle of Danforth’s Puritan errand of anthropocentrism” (Opie & Elliot 15). In their view, American history could be perceived as “a narrative of the gradual conquest of the American wilderness, a demonstration of civilization’s growing mastery of natural resources, a manifestation of built environments that celebrate their independence from nature” (Opie & Elliot 18).

In opposition to the dominant project of conquering the wilderness and subjecting it to the laws of capital, American Transcendentalism posited the re-sacralization of nature. Rather than treating it as a repository of raw materials, the American Transcendentalists “wanted to embrace nature in a holistic, mystical union so as to be ennobled by it” (Opie & Elliot 21). As Opie and Elliot state, for Emerson “to enter the wilderness was to enter the divine presence” (22). This testifies to the reevaluation of the wilderness in the Romantic period, the process that both fed into and stemmed from the rising nationalist pride. As Roderick Frazier Nash observes in his classic study *Wilderness and the American Mind*, “by the middle decades of the nineteenth century wilderness was recognized as a cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem” (67). American writers, poets, and painters, such as Washington Irving, William Cullen Bryant, Thomas Cole, and many lesser figures, unanimously recognized the uniqueness of American untamed nature and its sublime potential, and generally endowed it with a religious as well as an aesthetic significance (Nash 78).

Yet for most Americans, as David Murdoch observes in *The American West: The Invention of a Myth*, the land was “savage and cruel, like its aboriginal inhabitants the Indians – but it was potentially bountiful”: “it offered the opportunity of independence to whoever could seize and use it” (2). The ensuing conquest of the Western wilderness had been at a certain point translated into a powerful national myth, the myth of the West. In the light of this myth, as Murdoch states, “the frontier experience permanently shaped the American character,” but above all, “it defined America’s core values: individualism, self-reliance, democratic integrity” (3).

There is no denying that in the popular imagination the westward expansion was a unique process that determined the unique destiny of the American nation. Yet as Murdoch explains in his monograph, its reputed profound influence on American history derived from the emphasis placed on the conquest of the West as “an era with clearly defined limits,” and as he puts it, “The origin of that emphasis, the insistence on a symbolic moment for the ‘end of the West,’ lies in the actual emergence, in codified form, of the cluster of images and ideas which accorded such primal significance to the frontier experience” (10). Furthermore, as Murdoch argues, those images and ideas about the West, its heroes and its meaning, “were invented to serve a specific purpose at a particular time”: “They were produced in response to the doubts and fears of America in the two decades on either side of the turn of this century” (10). He claims that it is easy to demonstrate that “the *myth* of the West arose out of a crisis which exposed a contradiction at the heart of America’s self-image,” the crisis “in the minds of many Americans, who saw a frightening conflict between how they conceived their country

and what it had become" (20). According to Murdoch, in the myth of the West, "nostalgia for the lost wilderness and the end of the frontier became bound up with nostalgia for a simpler America" (21). Belying the stark and rather depressing reality, the myth-makers portrayed the West as "the arena where all the old values fuelled heroic endeavour – a world of chivalry, honour, courage and self-reliance" (Murdoch 21).

This "inspired propaganda" was soon bolstered by "an historical hypothesis which confirmed what the propagandists had implied: that the frontier experience had permanently shaped the American character" (Murdoch 22). Such a historical hypothesis was first presented by Frederic Jackson Turner in 1893 in the essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," whose central premise was that the westward expansion forged the American spirit and vitally contributed to the composite nationality of the American people. As Opie and Elliot observe, "Turner found a symbol for democracy, individual, and free enterprise in the West" (23), and articulated "a new aspect of the American myth, that of the disappearing frontier, the elusive mythopoetic West that embodied the essence of the American character" (25).

The official versions of the triumphant American march across the continent largely interpreted the process as preordained and inevitable, as the fulfillment of the nation's Manifest Destiny, or as an "immutable necessity," to use Foucault's phrase. But the American historian David Quinn presented the story of "how the West was won" from an entirely new perspective. In his account Quinn offered a thought-provoking counterfactual scenario for the American settlement, in which, as Black puts it, "he highlighted the importance of Europe's industrial dynamics" for the westward expansion (58). Quinn argued that the colonization of the West might not have been so successful, if it had not been fuelled by the continuing immigration from Europe: "The biggest question mark would lie over the capacity of the indigenes [Native Americans] to stage something of a come-back once European settlements had ceased to be bolstered by officials and soldiers and by increasing numbers of emigrants" (qtd. in Black 58). It is hardly accidental that the name of the central character in one of the earlier novels by Auster, *City of Glass*, Daniel Quinn, echoes so closely the name of David Quinn, the historian who speculated about the outcome of the confrontation between white settlers and the native peoples of North America, for precisely its uncertainty has become the premise of the alternative history presented in *Travels in the Scriptorium*.

The capacity of the indigenous tribes to reclaim their territories taken over by European settlements represents a major threat to the existence of the Confederation, the counterfactual version of the American state in Auster's novel. This unrealized possibility is explicitly mentioned by one of the characters, Minister Joubert, who points out: "If I were in their place, I'd be sorely tempted to reconquer the western provinces. The ground is fertile there. The forests are full of game. It would give them a better, easier life" (Auster 74). The events adumbrating the imaginary history of the USA are included in the inserted narrative, contained in the manuscript found and read by the protagonist of the novel, Mr. Blank. Mr. Blank "is reasonably certain that the present moment can be situated sometime in the early twenty-first century and that he lives in a

country called the United States of America” (Auster 15). By his own admission, Mr. Blank, the reader of the typescript, belongs to the actual history, so he is able to pick out the differences and similarities between the USA and its imaginary counterpart, the Confederation. It is, as he observes,

Just another name for America. Not the United States as we know it, but a country that has evolved in another way, that has another history. But all the trees, all the mountains, and all the prairies of that country stand exactly where they do in ours. The rivers and oceans are identical. (Auster 87)

The story read by Mr. Blank purports to be a report, or a confession, written in prison by Sigmund Graf, a civil servant employed at the Bureau of Internal Affairs. Prior to his career in civil service, Graf had spent more than a year among the Primitives, which is the derogatory designation of the native inhabitants of the Alien Territories adopted by the official discourse to affirm the supremacy of the Confederation culture. Thus, he can be regarded as an explorer of the West, or rather the Southwest, for in the embedded narrative the frontier is shifted to the vast desert expanses unmistakably suggesting this particular region of the USA, captured in all its essential characteristics: “Emptiness all around, a ferocious blue sky overhead, pounding light, and then, when the sun goes down, a chill to freeze the marrow in your bones” (Auster 91). The transposition of the frontier to the contested territories, the spitting image of Utah, Arizona, Nevada, and New Mexico, is a move that points to Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*, a literary praise of the “‘strange mystic unknown’ Southwest” (Abbey, *Confessions of a Barbarian* 113, quoted in Murray 15), and a landmark in late twentieth-century American nature writing.

But Graf is not merely an explorer. Living among the indigenous tribes in the Alien Territories, Graf studied their customs and beliefs, their diverse ways of life, and became quite knowledgeable on the subject: “The Tackamen in the east bury their dead, just as we do. The Gangi in the west put their dead on elevated platforms and leave the corpses to rot in the sun. The Crow People in the south burn their dead. The Vahntoo in the north cook the bodies and eat them” (Auster 72). Thus, he comes close to being an ethnographer or an anthropologist. The role he performs in this capacity is far from being neutral, for as Edward Said argues in his essay “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors,” “recent European and American anthropology [...] carries within it as a major constitutive element the unequal relationship of force between the outside Western ethnographer-observer and a primitive, or at least different but certainly weaker and less developed, non-Western society” (307-308). In his essay Said goes on to disclose “the constitutive role of the observer, the ethnographic ‘I’ or subject, whose status, field of activity, and moving locus taken together abut with embarrassing strictness on the imperial relationship itself” (308). It follows, then, from Said’s argument that an anthropologist is an emissary of the imperial enterprise, an agent of the dominant metropolitan center of power, in this case the capital of the Confederation. Yet of this aspect of his work, of his unwitting entanglement with the warmongering politics of the day, Graf remains fatally unaware.

In Auster's novel, Graf writes his report in prison, and in the place of his confinement he can sense the desert stretching outside the window of his cell:

Each time the wind blows from the west, I can smell the sage and juniper bushes, the minima of those dry distances. I lived out there on my own for close to four months, wandering freely from one place to another, sleeping outdoors in all kinds of weather, and to return from the openness of that country to the narrow confines of this room has not been easy for me. (Auster 13)

Quite tellingly, his last wish is "to be able to look at the sky again," "to stand out in the open and look up at the immense blue sky above [him], to gaze at the howling infinite one last time" (Auster 14). The "howling infinite," of course, alludes to the famous passage in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*:

all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore? But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! (107)

The sea-voyage in *Moby-Dick* represents the quest for the truth that "resides in landlessness alone," in "the howling infinite" of the illimitable expanse of the ocean. It is playfully introduced as a crucial intertextual motif in the 1976 novella "The King's Indian" by John Gardner, in which the protagonist, Jonathan Church, obviously modelled on Melville's Ishmael, contemplates going to sea:

I wanted to be there, with Plato and Plotinus, despite all my sensible talk about southern Illinois. In landlessness alone lies the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God! thought I. Better to perish in that howling infinite than be... something or other. (I forget my phrase.) (Gardner 224)

The epistemological dimension of the "howling infinite," which can be traced back to Melville's *Moby-Dick*, is implicit in Thoreau's description of the wilderness in *The Maine Woods*. Thoreau's account of his expedition up the Penobscot river into "the howling wilderness which feeds it," details his confrontation with the pristine natural world, with "the country [that] is virtually unmapped and unexplored, and [where] still waves the virgin forest of the New World" (*The Maine Woods* 82-83). Thoreau is particularly sensitive to the immensity of the scenery and the seeming boundlessness of the woods:

What is most striking in the Maine wilderness is the continuousness of the forest, with fewer open intervals or glades than you had imagined. Except the few burnt lands, the narrow intervals on the rivers, the bare tops of the high mountains, and the lakes and streams, the forest is uninterrupted. It is even more grim and wild than you had anticipated, a damp and intricate wilderness, in the spring everywhere wet and miry. (*The Maine Woods* 80)

Thoreau depicts the natural landscape in terms strongly reminiscent of Kant's notion of the mathematical sublime, thus effecting the shift from the howling wilderness as its potential locus to the howling infinite as its incarnation. As Philip Shaw explains, in Kant's philosophical system the sublime "refers to things which appear either formless

(a storm at sea; a vast mountain range) or which have form but, for reasons of size, exceed our ability to perceive such form,” but even more relevantly, according to Kant, the sublime brings into question the human ability to discern boundaries or spatial or temporal limitations; the sublime is thus “an affront or ‘outrage’ to our powers of comprehension” (78). Shaw goes on to present Kant’s division of the sublime into two categories, “mathematical” and “dynamic.” Thus in the mathematical sublime, “the imagination is overwhelmed by spatial or temporal magnitude; the experience is too great for the imagination to ‘take it all in’ at once,” and it puts to test “the ability of the mind to submit formlessness, such as the random, excessive movements of a storm, or the imperceptible contours of a vast cathedral, to the rational idea of totality” (80, 82).

In the contemporary era, the notion of “the howling wilderness” has been resuscitated by Edward Abbey, who employs the phrase in the opening section of *Desert Solitaire*, in the context that literalizes its meaning:

I came to a dirt road on the right, where a small wooden sign pointed the way: Arches National Monument Eight Miles. I left the pavement, turned east into the howling wilderness. Wind roaring out of the northwest, black clouds across the stars—all I could see were clumps of brush and scattered junipers along the roadside. (Abbey 22)

Abbey quite self-consciously combines the tradition behind the “howling wilderness” with the Transcendentalists’ call for a return to nature. As Buell states:

[Abbey] describes his deepest purpose as “to confront, immediately and directly if it’s possible, the bare bones of existence”: Thoreau redivivus. [...] just as Thoreau turned to the classics as a way of returning to nature—so Abbey returns to the now classic Thoreau as a way of expressing his own turn to a more primal nature. (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* 72)

The motif of the “howling wilderness” has in fact a long history, going back to the perils faced by Jacob described in the passage 32: 10 in *Deuteronomy*, which in *King James Bible* reads: “He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye.” Then, “the waste howling wilderness” was adapted by William Bradford, who in the earliest account of the American colonization of the New World, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, dwells at length on the dangers and hardships of the settlement. In the providential framework advanced by Bradford, the Pilgrim Fathers, the exclusive, elect group of believers, were vested with the task of bringing out God’s design on the earth, a truly daunting and formidable enterprise, as it soon turned out. In his account the Pilgrims are presented as exiles in a “howling wilderness,” who struggled against all adversity to bring into being the New Jerusalem: “what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men [...] the whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue” (62). Bradford in his chronicle explicitly defined the mission of the colonists in the New World as the taming of the “howling wilderness.”

Buell decodes the term as signifying “vacancy, emptiness waiting to be filled” (*The Environmental Imagination* 52), and he contrasts this Puritan vision of the New

World nature with the view that prevailed in the Southern colonies, “dystopian desert” versus “arcadian Utopia”:

This dyadic scheme has sometimes been used to sort out the different provincial enclaves. Marx links the tradition of dystopian stereotyping with Puritan New Englanders' evocation of the howling wilderness, the image of arcadia with the more temperate region of the more latitudinarian Virginia planters. (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* 60)

In Auster's novel, the American wilderness is transformed into “the unmapped expanses of the Alien Territories,” the territories inhabited by the Primitives and explored extensively by Graf, the purported author of the embedded narrative. Besides the names of the tribes confined to the Alien Territories, their last stay against the onslaught of the imperialist power, in his account Graf mentions also strange, unfamiliar names of geographical places and topographical features of the imaginary state, of cities and provinces of the Confederation: Neue Welt, Nachtburg, Tierra Blanca, Faux-Lieu, Tierra Vieja Province, Mont Sublime. He refers to fictitious historical events, such as the Southeast Border Wars, and political documents, for example, the Consolidation Treaty of the Fourth of March, perhaps the counterpart of the Declaration of Independence signed on the Fourth of July. He notes the calamities suffered by himself and his family: “the riots at the Sanctus Academy in Beauchamp led to the outbreak of the Faux-Lieu Language Wars, and two months after the invasion I saw my mother and younger brother burn to death during the Sacking of Luz” (Auster 46). Luz, which means “light” in Spanish, is “a textile center in the northwestern part of Faux-Lieu Province” (Auster 47), and as Graf explains, his father and himself “were among the seven thousand who took part in the exodus to the neighboring province of Neue Welt, to Nachtburg” (Auster 47). Their journey from Luz to Nachtburg can be read as transition from light to the city of night, a decline, a fall into darkness; hence in the provided narrative context, the name of the province, Neue Welt, New World, with its paradisiac connotations, seems bitterly ironic.

However, the rationale behind the presented counterfactual incidents and designations appears more complex; it goes beyond clever wordplay. In his report Graf dwells in particular on one disaster, the cholera epidemic termed the Blight of History, and the interpretation of the significance of its timing: “it struck just as the long and elaborately planned Unification ceremonies were about to begin,” and “one can understand how it could be interpreted as an evil sign, a judgment on the very nature and purpose of the Confederation itself” (Auster 47). Such circumstances cast a shadow on the Confederation; they put it in a rather unfavorable light. The unification must have been a bloody process, with many victims sacrificed to the higher purpose. The implicit condemnation is borne out by the title attached to the ruler of the Confederation, the Protector, possibly a hint at Cromwell, the Lord Protector of England. Furthermore, one cannot escape noticing the prominence of French, German, and Spanish names, and in consequence, the marked presence of these three nationalities in the Confederation in the place of the Anglo-Saxon domination in the early history of the American republic. The development of the Confederation and its westward expansion were effected with

the participation of settlers from Iberia, Gaul, Albion, Germania, thus, it is an international enterprise. This can be viewed as a correction to the dominant vision of the conquest of the West, which as Murdoch points out, “is white and in essence Anglo-Saxon, and it “pays no attention and gives no credit to the Spanish-American contribution to the winning of the West” (9).

The Confederation as an amalgam of several European states, a surrogate of Western imperialism at large, is presented as a quasi-tyranny intent on wiping out the Primitives. Minister Joubert, a state official, summarizes it aptly: “We slaughtered them and enslaved them and then we herded them together in the parched and barren territories beyond the western provinces” (Auster 73). This treatment is in keeping with the American saga of the West, in which the Indian is a much-demonized ruthless player, but in reality was nothing more than a helpless victim of the nascent capitalist modern order. As Murdoch puts it,

But by the time he had stopped oscillating between the roles of noble savage and fiendish redskin which public opinion had assigned him, he had become dehumanised. Much of the story presents the Indian as alien, implacable and irredeemable, an aspect (perhaps the most fearsome aspect) of the untamed land to be conquered by the march of progress. (Murdoch 9)

Joubert sends Graf on a mission whose aim is ostensibly to locate and capture Ernesto Land, a presumed subversive illegally operating in the Alien Territories with a hundred men, “a small band of anti-Confederationists.” Land, according to Joubert, has acted on his own initiative, “stirring up discontent among the Primitives, preparing to lead them in an insurrection against the western provinces” (Auster 72). Graf openly disbelieves the Minister’s allegations, pointing out that

An uprising is impossible. Military action would require unity among the Primitives, and that has never happened and never will. They’re as various and divided as we are. Their social customs, their languages, and their religious beliefs have kept them at odds for centuries. (Auster 72)

Yet Joubert insists that Land has turned against his country and betrayed the Confederation.

Unfortunately, Graf’s account is not finished; it just breaks off before telling about how he crosses the border and ventures into the Alien Territories, to which Mr. Blank, the reader of the typescript, reacts with a contemptuous snort. The protagonist is frustrated and disappointed, “regretting having wasted so much time on that misbegotten excuse of a story” (Auster 81). To add to his chagrin, he learns that Graf’s report is in fact a fictional work, a novel with the missing final pages. Its reputed author, John Trause, whose surname is the anagram of Auster, is a character appearing in Auster’s earlier novel *Oracle Night*. Now Mr. Blank is charged with the task of inventing the ending to Trause’s novel. One important narrative problem to be solved by Mr. Blank is Graf’s situation once he gets to Ultima, “the westernmost tip of the Confederation, the place that stands at the edge of the known world” (Auster 14). Graf cannot cross the border, nor can he contact the Minister; to make matters worse, the

commander of the garrison in Ultima, Colonel De Vega, pretends that he knows nothing about Land and the hundred rebels who have entered the Alien Territories.

Mr. Blank proves to be very inventive. He is clearly enjoying the role of a fabulator. In his completion of the missing conclusion, Graf does secretly venture into the Alien Territories, where he encounters a village filled with slaughtered Primitives. Thus, his ride into the wilderness leads to the discovery of a gruesome massacre committed on the native people:

The moment he enters, he's greeted by the overpowering stench of death, the sickening smell of decomposing bodies, and there, in the dim light of the hogan, he sees a dozen slaughtered Gangi—men, women, and children— all of them shot down in cold blood. [...] among them Graf recognizes a number of people he befriended twelve years before. (Auster 91)

This part of Mr. Blank's recreation of the story culminates in a shocking twist: Graf comes to the conclusion that Land is responsible for the massacre. He begins to believe that he has stumbled on a much more sinister plot: "What if the rumor of an insurrection is no more than a blind to cover up a far more sinister undertaking: a quiet slaughter of the Primitives that would enable the government to open their territory to white settlement?" (93) Mr. Blank in his rendition of Graf's report aka Trause's novel restates the idea in the following way: "The Confederation is a fragile, newly formed state composed of previously independent colonies and principalities, and in order to hold this tenuous union together, what better way to unite the people than to invent a common enemy and start a war?" (Auster 88). He revises the original text, replacing the derogatory term "Primitives" with "Djinn," reminiscent of the more familiar but equally pejorative "Injuns." At this stage, Mr. Blank is stuck with two conflicting interpretations of the events. The first one, which basically reflects Graf's "reasoning," attributes to Land, De Vega, and the entire military a hideous design "to hatch a phony war with the Djinn in order to hold the Confederation together" (Auster 116). But there is also "Joubert's position"—Land is a traitor acting on his own and uniting the Djinn against the Confederation. However, Mr. Blank is satisfied with neither of these two options. He wants to put another twist on the events, to reveal another layer of deception. He has a flash of inspiration, leading to the erasure of the previously invented incidents: "Back to the beginning. Part two, that is. Back to the beginning of part two, when Graf slips across the border and enters the Alien Territories. Forget the massacre of the Gangi" (Auster 118).

In the new version of Graf's venture into the wilderness, Graf stumbles on the mass of the slaughtered dead, but this time, the corpses of white men in uniforms. Land is among them, which means that he and his troops have been butchered. Graf has no doubt that Land and his men were murdered by the Djinn. But Graf is wrong and it is the most painful irony of the reshaped story. He never realizes that he has been duped; it never occurs to him that "They're all in on it—Joubert, the Ministry of War, De Vega, the whole lot of them" (Auster 120). Land had failed in his mission to stir up a revolt among the Djinn, so the men in power had to "cook up a new plan and send a second army into the Territories" (Auster 120).

Graf becomes the “key figure” in this devious scheme, because its success depends on what he will put in his report. His superiors count on receiving from Graf “a vivid, eyewitness account of what happened, with all the blame put on the Djiin” (Auster 121), and he unwittingly obliges them. His manuscript, skillfully edited and released to every newspaper in the country, will give the proper justification to the ensuing war against the Djinn, necessary to sway the public opinion. Graf realizes “how cruelly he's been tricked,” and “fires a bullet through his skull” (Auster 121). Graf had finally understood his part in the plot, concocted by the imperialist regime. Even though he was the author of the report, he proved to be merely a pawn in the larger political scheme, acting out the role of an emissary of the empire, lending a semblance of legitimacy to the ensuing massacre of the Djinn and the conquest of their territory

The embedded narrative in *Travels in the Scriptorium* shares its basic impulse of inverting the past with the recent postcolonial historical novels which Greg Forster examines in his article “Atlantic and Other Worlds: Critique and Utopia in Postcolonial Historical Fiction.” These novels, too, envision the alternative course of events, but there is a fundamental difference between Auster's rewriting of the history of the USA in *Travels in the Scriptorium* and the reinvention of the colonial past in Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger* (1992) and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2006). In contrast with Auster's novel, these two novels dramatize “the utopian recovery”; as Forster puts it, “While developing maps of the colonial past, these novels also seek alternative ways to conceptualize the postcolonial future” (1332). In Forster's view, the alternatives to colonial capital they envision are “critical utopias” (1333), because they “engage in the utopian project of constellating alternative, postnational futures, which they locate in the unrealized residues of a ‘premodern’ past that persists within and disrupts the ‘homogeneous, empty time’ of colonial modernity” (Forster 1329).

As an example of alternative history, Auster's novel departs from the model prescribed by Katsman, too, in one significant respect: neither the general narrator nor Mr. Blank, nor Sigmund Graf for that matter, explain what chain of circumstances led to the emergence of the Confederation, this peculiar version of the American state. The reader is denied the knowledge which different outcome of which “nodular event” in the early years of the Republic had changed the course of its evolution. Even though the enigma of the “bifurcation point” is unresolved, *Travels in the Scriptorium* offers a new and disturbing vision of the American westward expansion in the first half of the nineteenth century. The lack of technological innovations characteristic of the American life in the second half of the nineteenth century—“No trains, no telegraph” (Auster 115)—suggests the 1830s or the early 1840s as the most plausible timeframe. The precise moment in the history of the USA that Auster's novel reinvents is the time before the Mexican War and before taking over the Southwest and California. The Mexican War and its political consequences marked the transition of the USA from a republic upholding its libertarian and progressive ideals to an invading imperial power. In his essay “Civil Disobedience” written precisely at that time Henry David Thoreau starkly denounced the two evils condoned by the American government, adding to the conquest of the Mexican territories its tolerance of slavery:

when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is the fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army. (n.p.)

Thoreau sounds here a note of warning against the rising imperialism and the strengthening sense of nationalism, two developments that coalesced in the conviction that the USA had a special mission to fulfil, the spreading of “progress” and “civilization” on the American continent and later, in the world at large as well. In Auster’s novel the imperialist mission heralds nascent capitalist and colonial modernity. But the Primitives are not merely subalterns to be subjugated and exploited—to use Marxist and postcolonial terminology, they cannot be assimilated to the process of empire-building and to the establishment of capitalism. In actual American history, pursuing these two aims meant not only the eradication of Native Americans but also the annexation of adjacent countries. This shift in the American policy toward its neighboring nations and peoples is reflected in Auster’s novel in the presentation of the westward expansion as a brutal invasion. In the alternative version offered by *Travels in the Scriptorium*, the expansion of the USA hinges on the acquisition of land by hook and by crook, on the displacement and elimination of the Native Americans. The trope of alternative history serves here as a distancing technique, and the effect of strangeness, defamiliarization, works to undermine the naturalization of the Indian slaughter and to liberate the American reader from the neutralizing hold of the myth of the West as a national ideology.

Auster’s novel heavily revises the two formative myths of the American state: the westward expansion as the cradle of the American character and the proving ground of democracy, promoted especially by Turner, and the original “errand into the wilderness,” with Manifest Destiny as its later incarnation justifying the imperialist mission. The wilderness itself is divested of spiritual significance, desacralized, as the Alien Territories are converted into the arena of carnage and indiscriminate slaughter. It is unreservedly sacrificed to the interests of the emerging imperialist enterprise, which is nothing less than the ultimate consequence of the original Puritan venture—the taming of the wilderness and the creation of a model Christian state for the rest of the world to admire. In the essay “Introduction to *Moby-Dick*” Said comments on “the discourse of American specialness [that] begins with the Puritan ‘errand into the wilderness’ and continues through such doctrines as Manifest Destiny, ‘making the world safe for democracy,’ and ‘the line drawn in the sand’” (364). The ideological mindset known as “American specialness” or “American exceptionalism,” according to Said, “has inspired the military and economic campaigns that devastated and then sought to rebuild Asia, Latin America, the Pacific, and Europe [...] without prejudice to its moral fervor or its reluctance to change its self-image as an all-conquering force for good in the world” (364). Speaking of Melville’s contribution, Said argues that *Moby-Dick* unmask what the critic himself calls the American nation’s “self-mesmerizing assumptions about its providential significance” (364). Yet Melville’s novel delivers

both “the salutary effect as well as the destructiveness of the American world presence” (Said 364). By contrast, Auster’s novel exposes the dire humanitarian and environmental costs of the ideology fostering the belief in the American nation’s “providential significance,” without any redeeming merit. For in *Travels in the Scriptorium* the rise of the USA as an imperial power and its hegemonic presence in the world are enabled by the destruction of the wilderness, by the ruthless conquest of the West and the concomitant displacement and extermination of Native Americans.

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