

*Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster.* Ed. by DENNIS BARONE. (Penn Studies in Contemporary American Fiction) Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1995. vi + 203 pp. £34.95 (paperbound £16.95).

When the Paul Auster/Wayne Wang film *Smoke* won the Silver Bear in Berlin in 1995, there was much collective heart-sinking amongst his readers. Now there would be 'introductory' books, series studies, quick-fix profiles, and reader's guides. It is therefore a special pleasure to discover that Dennis Barone's volume, the first book to appear on Auster, operates at a very high level of critical sophistication and interest. Without exception the twelve essays offer informed and often intensely thought-provoking readings of Auster's work: no mean achievement with an author who is generally construed as setting more puzzles than he solves.

This is not to imply that the collection is dry, over-erudite, or arcane. As the editor remarks in the introduction, essayists may talk about postmodern shifting subjectivities but they also remember that Auster is fun. Barone's introduction provides theoretical, historical, and cultural contexts for the fiction (a sharp analysis of 'Auggie Wren's Christmas Story' sets the tone) with due account taken of the relation to Baudrillard, historiographic metafiction, and realism. The essays that follow are wide-ranging, as one might expect from contributors located in Wales,

the Netherlands, France, Japan, and the United States. Pascal Bruckner and Marc Chénétier contribute translations of their afterwords to the French editions of (respectively) *The Invention of Solitude* and *The New York Trilogy*, drawing out Auster's strong connections to European culture. Motoyuki Shibata describes his experience of translating Auster into Japanese, highlighting the extent to which the experience of translation sits at the heart of Auster's work. William Drenttel's excellent bibliography lists Auster's own translations and his writing on translations, together with fiction, prose, poetry, and secondary works. (No pseudonymous work, however: a surprise, given the slipperiness of identity within Auster's fiction.) Norman Finkelstein makes illuminating connections between the poetry and the work of Oppen and Reznikoff, Derek Rubin considers Auster within the American-Jewish tradition, and Eric Wirth outlines philosophical contexts. Other contributors examine generic questions (Madeleine Sorapure on *City of Glass* as a 'meta-anti-detective story') or formal concerns (Stephen Bernstein on contingency and closure, Arthur Saltzman on realism).

Occasionally the temptation to 'solve the puzzle' is insufficiently resisted, and one becomes rather enmeshed in the ifs and buts of the typically convoluted possibilities of the Auster plot. But on the whole the essays demonstrate a profound engagement with the fiction in relation to sociohistorical as well as aesthetic matters. Two essayists are worth singling out, particularly for the broad political implications of their analyses. Steven Weisenburger makes a strong case for *Moon Palace* as revisionary of 1960s radicalism, drawing upon the work of Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers in the field of scientific thinking. Tim Woods provides two essays, one discussing *The Music of Chance* as a critique of the ideology of American capitalism as based upon Puritan expansionism, the other arguing that *In the Country of Last Things* emphasizes Auster's engagement with spatiality. Woods benefits from an informed awareness of the debates concerning the politics of spatialization (Foucault, Lefebvre, David Harvey) and close attention to the fiction itself, which tends to pivot on questions of place. This is the sort of essay that seems immediately obvious, once it has been written, but nobody else has written it. Given that Auster describes memory as 'the space in which a thing happens for a second time' (*The Invention of Solitude*), Woods's ideas are likely to prove influential.