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The Incredible Shrinking Man in Paul Auster's *Report from the Interior*: The Film and the Myths

Marie GOURRUT

- 1 “Metamorphosis is central to fairy tales, which shows us figures endlessly shifting their shapes, crossing borders, and undergoing change. Not surprisingly, stories that traffic on transformation also seek to change listeners and readers in unconventional ways” (Tatar 55). In other words, the “simple forms” (Jolles 159) of fairy tales are transformative narratives on transformations. For, as Maria Tatar points out, the idea of personal mutation emerges logically from a genre that draws ceaselessly on magic. As a result, fairy tales both produce excitement and revelation, either to the reader or the listener. Hence the powerful, long lasting and maturational effects they can have on us. Characters, in the realm of the story, transform themselves and so does the reader and the listener. In sum, behind the magical atmosphere that among other features defines the genre and seems involved by unexpected character shape-shiftings and situational change, lurks an infinitely “responsible adventure” (Eliade *Myth and Reality* 201). The very structure of the tale and its content proper, according to historian of religion Mircea Eliade, “refers to a terrifyingly serious reality: initiation, that is, passing, by a way of symbolic death and resurrection, from ignorance and immaturity to the spiritual age of the adult” (*Myth and Reality* 201). Not only does the plot of the fairy tale, entailing “initiatory ordeals (battles with the monster, apparently insurmountable obstacles, riddles to be solved, impossible tasks, etc.), the descent to Hades or the ascent to Heaven (or what amounts to the same thing, dying and being reborn), the marriage with the princess” (*Myth and Reality* 201), remind us of traditional rites of *passage* typical of ceremonies of initiation in archaic societies, but “the tale repeats, on another plane and by another means, the “exemplary initiation” (*Myth and Reality* 202). To put it another way, this kind of narratives reiterates ‘initiation’ on the level of the imaginary, and thus “continue[s] to transmit [its] message, to produce mutation” (*Myth and Reality* 202) on the reader’s mind.

- 2 In this light, the eye-popping plot of the 1957 movie *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, one of the two “cinematic earthquake[s]” (*Report* 135) which Auster recalls in his nonfictional *Report from the Interior*, is a good case in point to illustrate Mircea Eliade’s theory. For it both demonstrates, through Auster’s ontological change which was triggered off by the movie, the (enduring and) transformative power of fiction, and that initiation, as a primary means to achieve this transition, is consubstantial with the human condition. American poet Ted Hughes once described “the momentum behind metamorphosis as passion that ‘combusts or levitates—mutates into an experience of the supernatural’” (quoted in Tatar 62). In his boyhood, Auster has experienced a similar transcendental episode, since the movie involving the protagonist’s sudden, undesired, bodily mutation, has elicited what he describes as “a metaphysical shock, [...] leav[ing] [him] in a state of gasping exaltation, feeling as if [he had] been given a new brain” (*Report* 106). “The strange, almost unbelievable story of Robert Scott Carey” (*Report* 107), especially the final scene of the film centered on the hero’s struggle and his “resolv[ing] to do anything in his power to survive” (*Report* 125), takes up and resembles, in multiple ways, the initiatory and transformative venture of the fairy tale. Even as the character continues to face the horror of an inevitable regression, Auster himself underwent a personal transformation, a spiritual awakening which, he remembers, “drastically alters the way [he thinks] about the universe” (*Report* 106). To put it in another way, “the [jolt] of “*Shrinking Man*”, in Auster’s own words, triggered and developed higher awareness—“str[icking] [him] with all the force of a blow to the head” (*Report* 129).
- 3 Indeed, *Report from the Interior* can be read as a fairy tale depicting more the course of an initiation rather than mere anecdotes and childhood reminiscences. From the animistic backdrop quintessential to a child’s perception on which the autobiographical writing opens, to the description of two “somber little black-and-white film[s]” (*Report* 106) whose magic power transformed a pre-teen’s worldview as much as they turn the second installment of the text into a virtual screen, and finally to the portrait of the “boy-man” (*Report* 182) cursed, Rapunzel-like, to write “[t]housands words to the same person” (*Report* 182) along with the final photographs illustrating the various sections—this four-part, ever shape-shifting volume is, like *The Arabian Nights*, a story of metamorphoses. It retraces, in fact, a symbolically initiatory pathway, showing how the alchemy of fictions, notably two decades of a life in words and images, often leads a small, ordinary, post-World War II suburban New Jersey boy, to be metamorphosed into an aspiring writer. A subject in progress, Paul Auster, like a fairy-tale hero, progressively discovers, through the lens of fictions, what it means to become human. He thus pursues, in this fifth non-fictional work, his quest for identity started in his “chosen and invented mythology” (Barone 14), *The Invention of Solitude*, and makes it a universal one: “[...] because you think of yourself as anyone, as everyone” (*Report* 4). Therefore, before being able to fabricate fictions, one invents them to reassure oneself. Auster remembers reading unforgettable *Märchens* such as “‘Hansel and Gretel’ which was the one that frightened [him] most”, but also “‘Rumpelstiltskin’ and ‘Rapunzel’” (*Report* 19) or being confined to the cinematic universe of another’s imagined stories: *The Incredible Shrinking Man* which “burns itself into [his] heart forever” (*Report* 113) perfectly exemplifies it.
- 4 Beside *The War of the Worlds* whose impact was tremendous, leading Auster’s younger self to “a sudden realization of the limits of God’s power” (*Report* 106), *The Incredible*

Shrinking Man and *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* had a significant effect on him and helped him forge his writer's identity and his creative imagination. If both "written films" (quoted in González 18) are, indeed, stories of metaphorical rebirth, and therefore convey a dynamic of change, the first one, however, that Auster watched when he was ten, owes more to a classical fairy tale than to a modern mid-twentieth century film, in so far as it hinges on metamorphosis, both physical and ontological, and deals with initiation, the character's and the imaginary one supplied by tales. Yet the unfortunate Carey is not the enchanted prince of a fairy tale yearning for deliverance from his animal state but rather an average man, the victim of the curse of modernity who, after being exposed to a dense, all enveloping mist while on a cruise with his wife, Louise, awakens one day and finds himself transformed, losing weight and growing shorter. This solitary adventure features both—from the character's progressive shrinking to the size of a Lilliputian creature, and then, to that of an ant, when he is forced, in the last part of the film, to undergo trials and to fight against "a monstrously large and repugnant spider" (*Report* 127), to his ultimately being as small as a subatomic particle in the final monologue—an odd, but ever constant and irreversible corporeal diminishment and a birth to a higher mode of consciousness already initiated by a meeting with a dwarf at a carnival, Clarice, and finally achieved with the overcoming of all obstacles and the defeating of the impressive "monster" in the cellar of the house. From this perspective, the hero's regression evokes and illustrates both the slow process of self-erasure, a drama of voluntary starvation and an existential experience that most of Auster's protagonists start, and it echoes, by extension, the theme of the dwindling of material resources that equally permeates his early fictions. Thus, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, as part and parcel of the author's initiation into the cinematic realm, not only taught Auster a lesson on "disappearance," conveyed by this cosmogonic myth-like plot story, dealing with a mode "of passage from darkness to light" (Eliade *Sacred and Profane* 180), but also made him realize that "initiation and its pattern were indissociably linked with the very structure of the spiritual" (Eliade *Rites and Symbols* 175). On the one hand, the hero's journey towards disintegration is reminiscent of a return to the origins—and hence, to the period of childhood followed by a retrogression to the embryonic state—but it represents also a necessary step, "an indispensable process in every attempt at total regeneration" (*Rites and Symbols* 175). And on the other hand, Carey's constant struggle and his being locked up in the cellar, echoes Auster's own experience as a writer, and his subsequent fictional writer-characters' sojourn in the room. Besides, the sequence reenacts, if only metaphorically, the first and the last stage of human existence. This is why the typical Austerian fiction epitomizes William H. Glass's injunction, "You have fallen into art—return to life" (quoted in Maniez 69), and figures Eliade's theory that "religious behavior and the structures of the sacred [have survived] [...] in the 'unconscious', on the planes of dream and imagination" (*Myth and Reality* 201). As a result, the analysis of the film, notably the last sequence, offers both a key to comprehend the author's own view on life and to better understand his literary world and, so to speak, his approach to rewriting myths and fairy tales.

1. Carey's Metamorphosis or the Mythical "Returns to the Origins"

- 5 In Paul Auster's "country of missing persons" (Shostak 1), the first "shrinking man" to disappear and thus to be transformed through the magic power of words into a fictional character, was Sam Auster, a man whose self seemed to be reduced to the social persona with which he faced the world. It then was Paul Auster's turn to erase himself behind the letter A and the third-person pronoun "in order to tell the story of himself" (*Invention of Solitude* 63) and to be ultimately metamorphosed into a writer. Later, his fictional characters, Quinn, M.S. Fogg, Anna Blume and Willy G. Christmas to cite but a few examples, successively initiate a process of self-starvation, either involuntarily—echoing, in a sense, Auster's personal experience of hunger while in the south of France which he depicts in *Hand to Mouth* as part and parcel of his formative years—or deliberately, when they choose to "embark on a journey of continual deprivation and stripping of the self" (Süben Guth 70). Similarly, it is noteworthy that, in Auster's novelistic universe, "whether it is a question of time, space, or financial resources—everything comes to exhaustion"¹ (Gavillon 43), as Ilana Shiloh certainly best summarizes it: "Quinn feverishly fills a notebook whose pages are running out, Effing furiously paints while his painting material are depleted, Ferdinand's minuscule ships get thinner, and Anna's handwriting becomes smaller and smaller" (Shiloh 158), while Nashe and M.S. Fogg progressively witness their inheritances dwindle to zero. Fasting, therefore, necessarily triggers for Auster's characters to literally and symbolically diminish their presence. In other words, they undergo a physical metamorphosis, followed by a radical transformation of the mind. Clearly, a corporeal regression characterizes Auster's fictional heroes, in the same way as it directs Carey's misadventure. Thus, Auster might as much have been inspired by Knut Hamsun's novel, *Hunger*, and by Kafka's 1922 narrative, *A Hunger Artist*, that he comments at length in a 1970 essay², than by *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. For Carey's regression, like the endangering enterprise that most of Auster's male protagonists set in motion, is in itself a backward journey and paves the way to disappearance.
- 6 No wonder that a book dealing with the magic of stories and with magic transformations brings us back to our own childhood and contains pictures and iconographical devices. As in any contemporaneous autobiography, photographs coexist with writing and thus "authenticate" (Barthes 85) and "participate in the narrative" (Compagnon 203). And like a fairy tale composed of texts and images, *Report from the Interior* displays illustrations, notably in the form of "written films". Analyzing the impact of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* on himself as a child, Auster portrays the hero's physical metamorphosis and primarily focuses on his passage from adulthood to childhood. Like the ten-year-old Auster, the reader, confronted with Carey's horrible fate, identifies with the protagonist and cannot help but share his predicament and travel back to his early days. Thus he experiences, feels and revives the joys and sorrows typical of his childhood. The film therefore conveys an image of infancy *par excellence* and, in one form or another, reiterates "a return to the origins," both for Carey, the reader and Auster. If, for Auster, the writing of *Report in the Interior*, in his own terms, equated with "the strange experience of encountering a stranger who happened to have been me once upon a time" (Cochoy and Vallas 6), similarly, the sudden, physical mutation of Carey might turn the reading of *The Incredible Shrinking*

Man (which resembles a tale and thus possesses the same virtues as the genre) into an extraordinary adventure by proxy which will subsequently lead the reader to experience a “return to the origins” and to meet “the child who accompanies them” (Péju 100). According to Pierre Péju, indeed, “transformations, animals and the proximity of the familiar and the uncanny in fairy tales, are more than mere symbols. In addition to what they symbolize, they function as catalysts which bring distant thoughts, not only repressed but also improbable ones” (Péju 183), and suggest associations to the mind. Thus they arouse both “a total emotional response” (Tatar 56) and work at keeping the door of dream and fantasy open. In short, metamorphosis can be read as a process of transformation in the same way as it embodies a permanent passage between forms, and thus, by extension, can serve as portals to communicate with this “child double” (Péju 101) that rigid adults can sometimes hide, lose or kill within themselves. This is why such stories are not only “the occasion for mental journeys during which the boundaries between the human [and] the animal [...], between desire and reality are abolished” (Péju 14), but they have the power to reactivate and perpetuate “the cosmic dimension of childhood” (Péju 120). They trigger off the propensity for grown-ups to abandon themselves to daydreaming and to be as imaginative as the child they used to be. In other words, they endow individuals with a kind of “atemporal animism” (Péju 119). Likewise, the French critic Jean-Paul Sermain contends that “[o]ne essential characteristic of the fairy tale resides in its very capacity to profoundly and durably, not to say forever, affect the reader. Its impact, as it seems, rests on the reverberation of a childish emotion” (Sermain 34). An echo of the distant past, this originally communal and ancient form of literature which transforms reality into frightening or wonderful memorable images thus epitomizes “the stifled and inexpressible voice of the child” (Sermain 41), that of our ancestors, and hence reconnects us to the past, to our roots, and to the origins of humanity. In other words, the enchanted world of fairy tales, imbued with a magical atmosphere and fraught with metamorphosis, may enchant us by bringing about childhood memories and nostalgia for the same period.

- 7 From this point of view, a “return to the origins” can be assimilated to a virtual regression to the blissful time of bedtime stories, and as such enables us to reconnect to our younger self. The same could be applied to *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, this fairy tale-like movie which explores a terrifying bodily mutation and which thus displays the same properties as the genre. All the more so as the reader, like Auster himself remembering the movie, identifies with the hero and thus endures, by the mechanism of projection, the same hardships as Carey: “[f]or, by now Scott Carey is no longer just a character in a film, Scott Carey is you” (*Report* 110). Furthermore, “the presence of a voice-over narrator, the shrinking man himself, who addresses the audience in the first person” (*Report* 107), not only echoes the oral tradition to which the folktale originally belongs to but relieves the fears aroused by “the ominous music played during the opening credit [...] to be taken on a dark and menacing ride” (*Report* 106). Thus it foreshadows, since the protagonist himself tells his story, a happy end. Indeed, Carey, on the morning in question, begins a magic-like metamorphosis, a slow descent into hell—first forestalled, at least momentarily, by an antitoxin, but, as even science itself turns out to be powerless, the process of shrinking continues—that will lead him to be turned into a child hero, a small person “who suddenly and appallingly is no bigger than you are, the size of a medium boy, barely five feet tall, dressed in the clothes of a ten-year-old and wearing sneakers on his feet” (*Report* 115), and resembling, thus,

young Auster watching the movie. However, this switching of identities entails a change of status for the protagonist. A man trapped in his childhood body and unable to face the responsibilities inherent to the “big world” (*Report* 7), he is forced to renounce his manhood, as living in a dollhouse, being taken care of, protected and nourished by his benevolent spouse testify to. While the character undergoes this dramatic change, sharing his solitude with nothing but his thoughts that he jots down in a memoir, he successively experiences despair, “rage,” “bitterness” and “contempt” (*Report* 116) for he cannot resign himself to living this absurd, solitary life. The “shrinking man,” like the typical fairy tale child hero who is, in Max Lüthi’s words, “often set apart from its surroundings by some peculiarities” (*Fairy Tale as Art Form* 136), shares in effect the same features and characteristics and produces the very same immediate appeal on the spectator as its literary counterpart. Carey appears, first and foremost, as disadvantaged, oppressed, cut off from the world, hence detached but also “easily detachable in another sense, since he is [...] the one then who generally leaves home from home [...] simply to ‘see the world’” (*Fairy Tale as Art Form* 136): “he rushes out of the house one night, a grown man in his child’s body, still wearing his ridiculous, infantilizing sneakers, a lost and pathetic figure walking down the darkened streets of his neighborhood, not going anywhere in particular, just going for the sake of going” (*Report* 118). This is why fairy tales protagonists, wanderers by nature and deprived of “family and community ties [...], are potentially always opened to entering into new relationships,” as Max Lüthi underlines in *The Fairy Tale as Art Form and Portrait of Man* (139).

- 8 Of paramount importance is thus the encounter with the Other, for meeting “helpers” (Propp 38), to borrow Propp’s terminology, turns out to be crucial in the process of identity formation and paves the way for transfiguration. So is the case of Carey who comes across “a *semblable, une soeur*” (*Report* 119) at a fair and starts a conversation with her that will eventually reorient “the ineluctable forces of disintegration towards acceptance and hope” (*Report* 120). This unexpected meeting also foreshadows, as often in fairy tales, a happy end: “bit by bit she tries to lead him into a new way of thinking about himself, explaining that being small is not the worst tragedy in the world, that even if they live among giants, the world can be a good place, and for people like them the sky is just as blue as it is for the others [...]” (*Report* 120). Thus, in the closed universe of Scott Carey as in the enchanted realm of fairy tales, one and the same person can abruptly change from a radiant man into a wretched childish figure, and then a despised “thumb-sized man” (*Report* 124) can suddenly become invisible. From the lonely belittled hero confined at home, whose life has been turned into a daily struggle and who suffers a certain humiliation, since he was neither able to be saved by science nor capable to come to terms with his condition, to the man ready to accept his condition, “we feel at once the capacity for change of men in general” (Lüthi *Once Upon a Time* 138). The focal point is neither the surprising loss of corporeality, nor the esteem and recognition of the moral strength of the character of the film, for “these are images for something more fundamental, man’s deliverance from his inauthentic existence and his commencement of a true one” (*Once Upon a Time* 138). At the heart of *The Shrinking Man*, as in most fairy tales, is therefore the representation of the world, both externally and internally, for metamorphosis, in spite of its impressive visual effect, is inextricably linked to identity, but the process, unlike to the pathway from youth to maturation that this popular variant of myths shows, only develops here to ultimately destroy the subject. If, on the surface, the fantasy of Carey’s transformation

symbolically illustrates the story of the self enduring catastrophic change and the indissoluble tie between man, animals and nature, this 'man-child-ant' who winds up being invisible might as well evoke "a spiritual perspective on the world, like myths" (Jones 13). The strange, incredible case of Carey, in this perspective, dramatizes, through the dissolving of one's identity followed by the emergence of another, "a belief in things unseen, a testament to the existence of another dimension to our existence" (Jones 13), and initiates "an experience with the sacred, that is, an encounter with a trans-human reality" (*Myth and Reality* 139). What lurks beneath the veil of Carey's regression, as for most of Auster's protagonists, is thus nothing but the mystery of initiation, "an archetypal form that surfaces and influences life wherever the events have the spirit of beginnings or the weight of an end" (Meade 9).

- 9 Where sacrifice and suffering once symbolized life trying to change, the drama experienced by Carey and by Auster's protagonists, prefiguring a total eclipse of identity, might be assimilated to rites of *passage* as Arnold van Gennep first defined them. Indeed, according to the French ethnologist and folklorist van Gennep, rites of *passage*—a term coined in his 1909 work *Les Rites de passage*—which are to be found in ceremonies of initiation mark the transition from one stage of social life to another. Although they slightly differ in detail, they are not only common in all cultures but they all follow the same and threefold scheme, that of separation, transition and incorporation. Crucial to the religious man of traditional societies, rites of *passage*, among which "the outstanding [one] is represented by the puberty initiation" (*Sacred and Profane* 184), are, in short, for the novice, a means of achieving his or her humanity. Similarly, Eliade, throughout his writings, fervently worked at unearthing, preserving and founding new meanings in the rites of our ancestors. If these rituals have progressively disappeared from conscious presentation, for, as he precisely underlines, "in the modern Western world, significant initiation is practically inexistent" (*Rites and Symbols* 19), we can still recognize them in "a considerable number of modern man's acts and gestures" (*Sacred and Profane* 208), in the same way that "the imaginative activities and the dream experiences of modern man continue to be pervaded by religious symbols, figures, and themes" (*Rites and Symbols* 192). This amounts to saying that the Romanian historian of religions described initiation as a universal rite "which coexists with the human condition" (*Myth and Reality* 202) and which still, nowadays, "performs an essential function in the economy of the psyche" (*Rites and Symbol* 192). From this perspective, Carey's isolation and retrogression to a child-like state, where tortures occur on a mental level, remind us of ritual scenes in which the conscious efforts imposed by rites of *passage* constitute an encounter with the sacred. Initiation, in Eliade's view, entails "a radical alteration of a mode of being. The initiate becomes as another: more fully in life emotionally and more spiritually aware" (Meade 10). From this viewpoint, Carey's adventure can be regarded as an initiation and illustrates the different stages in the whole process of change involved in these originally religious experiences, that is, "'going back' and beginning life over and again" (*Myth and Reality* 84). Through both the character's ontological transmutation and Auster's, we realize that initiation and its pattern are irreducibly linked to the very structure of spiritual life. Equally significant is the fact that initiatory patterns have survived in the form of themes or motives in artistic creations, and that modern man can be still affected by initiatory scenarii or messages. The film, to the aspiring writer, reveals the secret of regeneration and also explains, at least partly, Auster's fascination for confinement and his recurrent way of associating, in his work, the small space of

the room with attempts at renewal on the part of the characters who are, voluntarily or not, locked in such "locked rooms". Whereas the first part of the film, centered on "a once normal man transformed into a freak" (*Report* 116), can be viewed as the first steps to guarantee the revelation of the spiritual, the final scene, transforming the character into a Greek hero as he strives to sustain life and face death, is "reducible to a paradoxical, supernatural experience of death" (*Sacred and Profane* 187).

- 10 When the process of shrinking starts, the protagonist, in parallel of slowly watching himself, in despair, disappear, looks "haggard and anguished" and bears "dark circles under his eyes" (*Report* 114) which evoke the scars of his ritual descent. The scene thus marks the onset of the event when an outer drama triggers inner suffering. As if "participating in a prepared rite for leaving childhood games through ordeals of emotional struggle" (Meade 12), the small person that he has now become feels increasingly isolated from others in his dungeon-like house. He is, in fact, forced to sacrifice his own values and to be separated from the world and his family, "hounded so persistently that he can no longer go outside" (*Report* 116). He is thus portrayed as "still struggling to come to terms with his condition, still angry, still unable to find the courage to act as husband to Louise, and because he has withdrawn from her in his shame, he knows he is making her suffer, which only augments his own suffering" (*Report* 117-118). Suffering, constant struggle, confinement... Such terms obviously refer to "the mysteries of birth and rebirth", to borrow the subtitle of one of Eliade's most famous writing, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*. If we look closely, Carey's revelation of his true self requires primarily that he be segregated from others, as well as his going back to "the roots of knowledge, the roots of consciousness and the seeds of meaning hidden in each person" (Meade 10). For a time, the isolated protagonist, like the novice, "steps out being simply himself," initiates transition rites, and following in the "footsteps of heroes engaged in elemental struggle," strives to overcome pain and mental tortures so as to find "a spiritual home in the heart of his [small universe]" (Meade 12). "Only by a descent [beginning with Carey's returning to the childish status to his being eventually reduced to a small particle] and a series of adventures along the dark roads of hell, can the inner life fully awaken" (Meade 10). In other words, the loss of identity and even the betrayal of one's self, entailed by Carey's "return to the origins," signify that "the story of childhood ends and the next drama begins" (Meade 10). If, in a sense, the first part of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* figures the first phases of what Eliade labelled as "one of the most significant spiritual phenomena in the history of humanity" (*Rites and Symbols* 29), similarly Auster's characters "continu[e] the behavior pattern, the beliefs and the language of *homo religiosus*" (*Rites and Symbols* 192), by "proclaim[ing] their intention and profess[ing] to possess the means of transmuting human life" (*Rites and Symbols* 20).
- 11 Indeed, like Carey, Auster's "hunger artists" are often endangered by a process of inexorable diminishment" (*Shiloh* 156) as they begin "a journey to the borders of [their] sel[ves]" (Süben Guth 69), in order to pass "from mere biological existence to attain spiritual life" (Bruckner 28). Hence, Quinn, Blue, Effing, M.S. Fogg decide, in total isolation, to "push themselves to the limit of hunger and physical deprivation" (Bruckner 28) so as to hit bottom and, through what Bruckner considers to resemble "a differed suicide" (28), intend a direct opening of the spirit and soul in their existence. Thus, Austerian male characters have learnt the language of initiation for "[t]his self-destructive passion which barely avoids total annihilation, [...] transforms this confinement in one's room into a sort of secular asceticism without transcendence,

without God” (Bruckner 28). Among the critics who choose to focus on this apparent “shipwreck” (Bruckner 28) which M.S. Fogg certainly best epitomizes and illustrates, Sophie Vallas points out that not only does “Marco, like his predecessors, embark on a process of self-starvation, following in the footsteps of Knut Hamsun’s hero, and thus reproduce his initiatory scenario, but Auster’s analysis of Hamsun’s *Hunger* in his fundamental essay³ unveils the secret of the fabrication of his protagonists’ identities” (Vallas 135). Behind Fogg’s inevitable descent, that eventually comes to separate the man from the boy, lurks the desire to turn his life into a “a work of art, sacrificing [him]self to such exquisite paradoxes” (*Moon Palace* 20-21). “By shedding the skin of his limited sense of self, [M.S. Fogg, thus, elects to] temporarily become an ancestral dreamtime hero, [...] re-entering the origins stories of the culture,” writes Eliade (*Rites and Symbols* 19). For, as Michael Meade puts it in his foreword of *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, “in order to gain an increase of life for the individual evolving and the community involved with that individual, something must be sacrificed or ‘made sacred’” (13).

- 12 Fogg therefore initiates a movement toward zero, starting by gradually emptying his apartment and then slowly watching himself disappear, just like his literary and financial inheritance. *Hunger* becomes the means to “separate [him]self from [his] body” (*Moon Palace* 29), to purify it. It is first and foremost an existential experience entailing physical resistance and yet a spiritual one: “[e]ating”, Eliade writes, “is a ritual, and food is variously valorized by various religions and cultures. Food stuffs are regarded as sacred, or as gifts of divinity, or as an offering to the gods of the body” (*Sacred and Profane* 170). If Fogg, like Hamsun’s protagonist, “suffers but only because he has chosen to suffer [...] [for] [f]rom the beginning, it is made clear that the hero need not starve” (*Art of Hunger* 11), this painful, self-inflicted starvation and almost near-death enterprise—which drives him to primarily eat garbage, and hence to undergo humiliations, to finally lead him to diminish his corporeality and to weaken his mind—can be interpreted “as spiritual initiations, as obstacles that had been thrown across my path to test my faith in myself” (*Moon Palace* 68). In a desacralized world characterized by “the disappearance of any meaningful rites of initiation” (*Rites and Symbols* 19), Auster’s fictional characters experience “the art of hunger,” a modern rite of *passage* to “introduce themselves into the human community and into the world of spiritual and cultural values” (*Rites and Symbols* 20). “[M]ore fully in life by feeling a ‘little death’” (Meade 14), they engage, through the rewriting of an initiatory scenario, in the renewal of their personal lives. While “the preparation of the sacred ground” (*Rites and Symbols* 31) corresponds to Fogg’s withdrawal in Central Park, that is, his discovering of the place as “a sanctuary, a refuge of inwardness” (*Moon Palace* 63) in the core of New York, he then begins, thanks to his “blending into the environment” (*Moon Palace* 64) and his fasting, his inevitable descent to finally wind up to slowly disappear, in complete isolation, into nature, when he finds “a cluster of large rocks surrounded by overgrown foliage and trees [...] [which] formed a natural cave” (*Moon Palace* 76). This “shallow indentation” (*Moon Palace* 76) which echoes the initiatory hut “represents not only the belly of the devouring monster but also the womb” (*Rites and Symbols* 74). Paradoxically, the novice’s death, in cosmological terms, signifies “a temporary return to the virtual, precosmic mode, (symbolized by night and darkness), followed by a rebirth that can be homologized with a creation of the world” (*Rites and Symbols* 74). It reveals both the importance of the creation myth and that initiatory death is the only path to resurrection: “Entering the sacred spot identified with the uterus mother Earth” (*Myth*

and Reality 80) equates, for Fogg, being transformed into an embryo, symbolically dying to his first natural life, and then being “reborn” to a higher life. For, as Eliade explains regarding the phenomenology of initiation, “when brought to birth, man is not yet completed; he must be born a second time, spiritually” (*Sacred and Profane* 185). Just as the novice, during their period of segregation, is submitted to dietary taboos and various physical ordeals which have a spiritual meaning, Fogg’s “return to the origins” takes the form of a long journey, punctuated by fasting: “long bouts of vomiting, frenzied moments when my body wouldn’t stop shaking, periods when the only sound I heard was the chattering of my teeth,” “ferocious dreams [...], endless, mutating visions that seemed to grow directly out of my burning skin” (*Moon Palace* 77). Reenacting the cosmogony thus signifies “to make the myth present” (*Myth and Reality* 39) as Fogg’s dream of his distant ancestors, America’s first inhabitants, epitomizes and exemplifies it: “I suddenly began to dream of Indians. It was 350 years ago, and I saw myself following a group of half-naked men through the forest of Manhattan” (*Moon Palace* 77). He will return to the world a new man, saved by Kitty Wu, a modern version of “Pocahontas” (*Moon Palace* 76), and his friend Zimmer.

- 13 Like the shrinking man, Fogg’s “return to the origins”, therefore, means changing inside and, not simply “enjoy[ing] the paradox of living in a man-made natural world” (*Moon Palace* 69) or going back, as far as the film character is concerned, to the acculturate state of the child. It is noteworthy that, in *Moon Palace*, Julian Barber “reiterates, his grandson initial experience” (Gavillon 49) when he retreats, in order to escape the authorities, in a cave in Utah. While reaching the “degree zero of the pictorial” (Mathé 107), “no longer burdened by the threat of other people’s opinion or preoccupied by the result” (*Moon Palace* 169), he also heads towards the degree zero of the self, gradually losing his identity, in parallel to depleting his painting material. At the end of the episode, Barber, in this womb-like cave, becomes Effing, a man endowed with a totally new being and conception of the world. It follows that “every man is the author of his own life” (*Moon Palace* 13) and that “religion has become, so to speak, ‘unconscious’” (*Rites and Symbols* 192). In such moments of total crisis, Auster’s characters, guided by ritual elders and hence “always ready to offer themselves in sacrifice” (Bruckner 28), “still hold to pseudo religions and degenerated mythologies” (*Sacred and Profane* 209) in order “to obtain a total *renovatio*, a renewal capable of transmuting life” (Meade 16). Likewise, when Fogg witnesses his father’s “stunning transformation,” the latter drastically losing weight in the hospital, a second “Barber came to the surface” (*Moon Palace* 288). Similarly, Quinn, naked, gradually replacing food by words in Stillman’s apartment, literally and symbolically reducing his presence, ultimately comes to disappear at the end of *City of Glass*, in the same way the pages of his red notebook draw to an end. As for *In the Country of Last Things*, the book is in itself an image of regression: everything, food, language, pencils, candles, the pages of the blue notebook, even Woburn House itself, come, *in fine*, to vanish. Through the “art of anorexia” (Gavillon 43) practiced by Auster’s characters as an ascetic exercise, one thing is made clear: Paul Auster uses this once ritualistic prohibition, leading to the total dissolution of one’s self along with its mirror image, the depletion of material or financial resources, to suppress artifices and, as Maud Ellmann says “to reveal [...] the core of subjectivity” (quoted in Barone 17), that is, “the man hidden inside the man” (*The Invention of Solitude* 21).

2. The Last Sequence of the Film: An Image of Death and Resurrection

- 14 “[I]t’s evident, in fairy tales, that more is involved than mere external action,” Max Lüthi writes, underlining that such stories relating “how the hero conquers the dragon, marr[ies] the princess, and becomes king, depict processes of maturation” (*Once Upon a Time* 139). For “to be king,” he explains, “is an image for complete realization; the crown and royal robe [...] make visible the splendor and brilliance of the great perfection achieved inwardly” (*Once Upon a Time* 139). Despite the fact that these narratives exclusively focus on the hero’s actions and delineate their steady progression, fairy tales do not portray the character’s individual destiny but that of man in general, and more particularly his psychic development. The same can be said of the last sequence of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* which describes, through the protagonist’s symbolic ascension to invisibility, a higher degree of consciousness. All the more so as becoming invisible stands for one of the most spectacular metamorphoses in fairy tales, for the hero possesses the power to see what cannot be seen. Hence the reading of the last scene of the movie turns it “into a different film, a deeper film, the story of [a folktale hero]” (*Report* 126) striving to do his best in order to overcome obstacles and trials, in a previously familiar setting which has now become uncanny and populated by dangerous and voracious “predators” (*Report* 126). From that point on, it is impossible not to translate the ordeals and adventure of its protagonist into initiatory terms. What begins as a simple domestic pursuit, Carey being “the victim of the brutal assault of the cat who attacks the dollhouse” (*Report* 124), ends up as a spiritual awareness as he tries, like a mythical hero, to accomplish great deeds and to survive in a definitely *unheimlich* and hostile environment. Because, as in all initiations, “[t]he one who disappears into Mother Nature, returns adorned with new clothes, wrapped in the spiritual knowledge of our ancestors and [...] [endowed with] a deep creative will” (Meade 15).
- 15 Carey’s combat in the now huge, dark cellar of his house certainly best illustrates Auster’s phonetic and semantic game on “[r]oom and tomb, tomb and womb, womb and room” initially expressed in *The Invention of Solitude* (171), and could explain, at least partly, his penchant for closed spaces. More than a play on rhyming words that encapsulates Auster’s exploration and his blurring of the boundaries between, art, life and death, this musical association demonstrates that “certain aspects and functions of mythical thoughts are constituents of the human being” (*Myth and Reality* 182). On the one hand, it points, through the survival of rites and symbols in art, especially in literature and in its film adaptations, to the fact that “initiation is closely linked to the mode of being of individuals’ life” (*Sacred and Profane* 208), and on the other hand, the protagonist’s participation in ordeals “opens pathways between the withering ‘daily world’ and the sacred ‘other world’” (Meade 6) since Carey’s spiritual descent and emotional resurrection convey both a paradigmatic model of death and rebirth and show that initiation “still functions on the vital and psychological planes” (*Rites and Symbols* 193). An attentive analysis of the hero’s plight in such a dark enclosure, therefore, reveals why Auster’s protagonists reenact this fundamental existential experience comprising struggle, dying to one old state and being “twice born” (*Rites and Symbols* 18).

- 16 The presence and the abundance of the initiatory themes and symbols in the realm of *belles lettres*, notably in Arthurian romances, along with the fact that fairy tales and more recently fantasy literature, a genre which takes up countless motifs and employ initiatory scenarios, testify to the paramount importance of the phenomenon. To read paradigmatic narratives and to find one's way into an imaginative universe, as it seems, is consubstantial with the human condition, and hence is irreducible:

This amounts to saying that initiatory scenarios—even camouflaged, as they are in fairy tales—are the expression of a psychodrama that answers a deep need in the human being. Every man wants to experience certain perilous situations, to confront exceptional ordeals, to make his way into the otherworld—and he experiences all this on the level of his imaginative life by hearing or reading fairy tales, or on the level on his dream life by dreaming. (*Rites and Symbols* 190)

- 17 In Eliade's view, "the modern passion for such narratives expresses the desire to read the greatest possible number of 'mythological stories' desacralized or simply camouflaged under 'profane' forms" and demonstrates that underlying "the 'escape from time' brought about by novel reading", lies the desire to "transcend one's own time—personal, historical time—to attain other temporal rhythms than in which we are condemned to live and work" (*Myth and Reality* 191, 192, 193). Submerged as he may be in a time that is "fabulous and trans-historical", and following "the complications of these stories", the reader "witnesses the exemplary struggle between Good and Evil" (*Myth and Reality* 192, 190, 185) and sees the child hero make his way through the world, solving various riddles, tasks and difficulties in order to ascent to the throne by marrying the princess. Hence, "through an unconscious process of projection and identification, he takes part in the mystery and the drama and has the feeling that he is personally involved in a paradigmatic—that is, a dangerous, 'heroic'—action" (*Myth and Reality* 185). The fairy tale, along with recent stories derived from the genre, has therefore become "an 'easy doublet' for the initiation myth and rites" (*Myth and Reality* 202). Rituals being disused, myths came, in fact, to transform themselves into literary motifs, symbols and themes. They "now deliver their spiritual message on a different plane of human existence, by addressing themselves directly to the imagination" (*Rites and Symbols* 189). What has been previously said of literature also applies to cinema and comics. For instance, the originally comics protagonist, Superman, whose powers are almost unlimited, along with many other characters of films adapted from the medium or fantasy literature, "presents the modern version of the mythological or folklore heroes" and fulfills the reader/viewer's desires, "though he knows that he is a fallen, limited creature, to prove himself an 'exceptional' person, a 'hero'" (*Myth and Reality* 185).
- 18 Such is precisely the case of *The Incredible Shrinking Man*: when "the very ordinariness of its surrounding [...] suddenly takes on the dimension of the extraordinary, the impossible, for each thing has been reinvented, transformed into something else because of its enormous size in relation to Carey's body" (*Report* 126). Hence, in the small, closed universe of Scott Carey, as in the realm of the fairy tale which displays, as it seems, "a fascination for all extremes, extreme contrasts in particular" (Lüthi *European Folktale* 34), we sense now that anything can happen and nothing is impossible. Furthermore, the greater the contrast, the sharper the portrayal: for this reason the film tells of Carey's happy marriage and his Kafkaesque drama of corporeal transformation; of enjoying life on a cruise surrounded with people and being isolated from the world; of being small and desperate, and becoming a great folkloric

protagonist struggling to survive in a womb-like place. If, first and foremost, abrupt metamorphosis dazzles the eye of young Auster, the movie, in the last sequence, exclusively focuses on the hero's actions and becomes "the story of a man stripped bare, thrown back on himself, a minute Odysseus [...] living by the force of his wit, his courage, his resourcefulness, making do with whatever objects and nourishment at hand in that dank suburban basement, which has now become his entire universe" (*Report* 126). Not only does the courageous and astute little hero "endur[e] one physical trial after another" (*Report* 126), "sleeping in an empty box of wooden matches, striking a match as long as he is in order to cut off a slender filament of sewing thread, nearly drowning in a flood as water pours out of the defective water heater [...], scavenging for crumbs of harden bread" (*Report* 126-127), but he is now compelled to face, "in his quest for the most important prize of all, a stale, half eaten wedge of sponge cake" (*Report* 127), a terrifying and huge spider. As if he were "Odysseus trusting his sword into the eye of the Cyclops," the ant-sized man, armed with "a pin he has extracted from a pincushion" (*Report* 127) fights courageously against the impressive animal. Although "he does not have the confidence or strength of [its mythical counterpart]" (*Report* 127), he nevertheless shows himself to be superior to his adversary. Against all odds, the apparently ordinary, small and weak man, gets the upper hand over the enormous creature and, like the fairy tale's typical hero defeating the dragoon, triumphs over the giant. The scene tackles the theme of "appearance versus reality" (Lüthi *Fairy Tale as Art Form* 125) and deals with the concept of the struggle for life. This harsh battle against an animal also gives expression to "the redeeming function of difficulty" (*Myth and Reality* 188) and might epitomize, according to psychologists, the internal struggle with one's drives and feelings, that is, with our unconscious. For as Max Lüthi underlines it, "the hardest battle is the struggle with oneself. Each man is our own worst enemy. Only facing with the demon leads us to the highest goal and makes us the king whose redemption is expressed in the image of the marriage with the beautiful maiden" (*Once Upon a Time* 80). In short, "the confrontation of human beings with the external world and with the cosmos is mirrored in a fairy tale just as much as is the confrontation of human beings with themselves" (*European Folktale* 118).

- 19 All these important concerns of human existence which, among other idiosyncrasies, "mak[e] the folktale a folktale" (*European Folktale* 3) are reflected in the film in the same way they are part and parcel of Auster's imaginary realm. Auster might as well have been influenced by this ancient form of literature, as he often willingly admits in interviews⁴, and inspired by *The Incredible Shrinking Man* whose plot takes up the scenario of the tale. The spiritual message conveyed by Carey's initiatory and transformative adventure, beyond the magic power embedded in initiation, is that "real change occurs out of symbolic sacrifices and new meanings are made out of individual suffering" (Meade 12). "Traces of such a mythical behavior can also be deciphered in the desire to rediscover the intensity with which one experienced or knew for the first time; and also in the wish to recover the distant past, the period of the 'blissing beginnings'" (*Myth and Reality* 192-193). This tendency suggests that man in contemporary society is still nourished by his unconscious which has remained religious or still acts, in some way, religiously, whether they want it or not, and thus clings to theology and mythologies. "Nor this is surprising," Mircea Eliade says, "for it is through the experience of a trans-human reality, that man first came conscious of their own mode of being" (*Rites and Symbols* 191), that is, by passing through ordeals in order to retain the wisdom gained thanks to the adventure. Since in his view, "we are

each the necessary inheritors of a vast sacred heritage” (*Rites and Symbols* 8), “access to spirituality finds expression in a symbolism of death and rebirth” (*Sacred and Profane* 192). Eliade therefore establishes “initiation as an existential rite, an archetypal form, that surfaces and influences life whenever events have the spirit of beginning or the weight of an end” (Meade 9).

- 20 The final scene of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* is a good case in point to fully explore and comprehend the mysteries of death and rebirth: impersonating, for a time, a mythical hero, the shrinking man primarily retraces the long road of unending physical trials included in his ancestor’s journey to subsequently be reborn. Imprisoned as he might seem, Carey nevertheless succeeds in making “the inevitable descent into the underworld a direct opening of the spirit and soul” in his life (Meade 10). He offers, therefore, a visual image of the tripartite process of initiation, and confirms Eliade’s theory that “without conscious rituals of loss and renewal, individuals and societies lose they capacity to experience the sorrows and joy for feeling fully human” (*Rites and Symbols* 18).
- 21 Being shup up in the cellar equates, for the film’s protagonist, to enact the well-known ritual of “*regressus ad uterum*,” and to repeat the scenario of initiation—“death to the profane condition, followed by rebirth to the sacred world” (*Sacred and Profane* 196). As Eliade explains, “[t]he return to the womb is associated with the neophyte’s seclusion into the hut, or by being symbolically swallowed by a monster, or by entering a sacred spot identified with the uterus of Mother earth” (*Sacred and Profane* 195). Obviously, the womb-like place, permeated by intense solitude, in which Carey is symbolically buried belongs to the same family of images. All of them are images of cosmological valence since they obviously refer to the absolute beginning, and hence are connected “with germination, with embryology” (*Rites and Symbols* 24). They indicate that the “course of a new life is in preparation” (*Myth and Reality* 79) —the beginning of a mystical birth, of a spiritual life. The basic idea is the following: “through repetition of the cosmogony, time was regenerated, that is, it began again as sacred time, for it coincided with the *illud tempus* in which the world has first come into existence” (*Sacred and Profane* 80). The initiation ceremony is nothing but “an imitation of the gods, a recapitulation of the sacred history of the world” (*Rites and Symbols* 194) since, in the archaic worldview, something in our *cosmos* is only real in so far as it conforms to the sacred or the pattern established by the sacred. To reenact the cosmogonic myth boils down, for a man in a traditional society, to an eruption of the sacred into the daily world, and equally to benefit from the divine—pure, perfect, intact—energy of the creators of the world. As a result, “the cosmogony is the paradigmatic model for all creation” (*Sacred and Profane* 82) and it chiefly explains, then, “the regenerative function of the return to the time of origins” (*Sacred and Profane* 83).
- 22 Something similar happens in the cellar of Carey’s own house, to the extent that the protagonist undergoes, after a final and perilous combat, a total renewal: “[b]ut even as I touched the dry, flaking crumbs of nourishment, it was as if my body ceased to exist. There was no hunger—no longer the terrible fear of shrinking...” (*Report* 129). Indeed, when the film character ventures forth in the underworld, he becomes simultaneously stronger and more confident as he proves worthy of overcoming one obstacle after another, and ultimately emerges victorious. The viewer, the ten-year-old Paul Auster, along with the reader, identifies Carey’s progression with his own capacity of rising to progressively more difficult tasks, of gradually reaching ever-higher spheres. They

both deduce, from this exemplary pathway resembling “initiatory descent into hells, the realm of ghosts, and combats with monsters” (*Sacred and Profane* 208)—which, according to Eliade, primarily constitutes the experience of initiation—that “a state cannot be changed without being firstly annihilated, and hence is inaccessible to those who have not undergone the initiatory ordeals, who have not tasted death” (*Rites and Symbols* 24). And Eliade adds: “It remains true nonetheless that a human being becomes *himself* or *herself* only after having solved a series of desperately difficult and even dangerous situations, that is, after having undergone ‘tortures’ and ‘death’” (*Rites and Symbols* 193). From the perspective of the fairy tale, Carey gains the status of the folklorist or mythical hero and, speaking the language of initiation, we would contend that he achieves purification, followed by a birth to a higher state of being: “his thoughts push him forward to the next stage of understanding, and the victory [against the animal] turns out to be nothing of no importance whatsoever” (*Report* 127-128). Much in the same way as Carey undergoes a metamorphosis, the film profoundly and durably transformed Auster’s vision of the *cosmos*, as he remembers in *Report from the Interior*: “You feel that the world has changed his shape within you, that the world you live in is no longer the same world that existed two hours ago, that it will not and cannot ever be the same again” (*Report* 131). More than just entertainment, the fairy tale-like plot of the film not only secretly satisfied the ten-year old boy’s internal expectations but it also exemplifies, in his eyes, that “any and every human life is formed by a series of ordeals, by repeated experience of ‘death’ and ‘resurrection’” (*Sacred and Profane* 109). And that, following Carey’s model, the individual can “attain completion through a series of passages rites, in short, by successive initiations” (*Sacred and Profane* 181). It is no incident, then, that Auster’s literary universe (filled with orphans, widowers, magic objects such as his famous notebooks or the almost personified typewriter he has been using for decades, marked by the encounter with the Other, and characterized by embedded narratives or by the presence of a narrator who indubitably reminds us of the oral tradition) resembles the wondrous world of the fairy tale and invariably depicts, from their original isolation to their spiritual awakening, the metamorphosis of a lost, pathetic figure into a writer. So “the dynamics of the [...] extinction and rebirth,” which take place in this little room, come, in Auster’s view, to “[constitute] consciousness and therefore identity” (Patteson 115).

- 23 Indeed, Carey’s disappointment both with the world and human relationships, coupled with the vision of the little man’s regeneration in the small enclosure, might have led Auster to believe, like Eliade, that “being and the sacred are one” (*Sacred and Profane* 210). As the story unfolds, sketching an increasingly complex picture of Man and the world, one thing becomes evident: “to gain access to a fully responsible existence, open to spiritual values” (*Sacred and Profane* 208) requires, “a descent into hell, [...] to kill the old man within” (Bruckner 28). Paradoxically, “[t]he self must die [...] in order to live” (Bruckner 28). Because, as far as initiation is concerned, death is the opposite of birth, *not* the opposite of life” (Meade 9). Such a formative experience, for Paul Auster, the aspiring writer and film director, reveals that “archaic rites of initiation show the basic pattern for genuine change” (Meade 9) and how, without “spiritual vision and ritual structure, individuals lose the capacity to handle death and embrace fully life” (Meade 7). This is why, “[o]ne sees the possibility of resurrection repeated throughout Auster’s experience, particularly in *The Book of Illusions*” (Peacock 37). It is possible, therefore, to extrapolate from Auster’s closeness of death and resurrection described in “*The Book of Memory*” “in the form of a blossoming literary awareness, a newfound creativity and

understanding”, [...] [after] plung[ing] into the darkness of his consciousness, to include the whole of [its protagonists’ renewal]” (Peacock 37). From then on, Auster turns the writer’s room into “a scene of death and rebirth” (Shiloh 17) and keeps insisting, whether in interviews or in his fictional world, on the ritualistic structure associated with the act of writing, and notably on its tactile dimension. He indeed fetishizes both a quadrille line notebook, “a house for words, a secret place for thought and self-examination” (Wood), and such “a primitive instrument” (Wood) as the pen, which are part and parcel of his creation rite. If, in Auster’s eyes, the fountain pen first primarily “makes [him] feel that the words are coming out of [his] body, and then, you dig them into the page” (in Wood) of a preferably red notebook, the famous 1974 Olympia typewriter then “allows [him] to experience the book in a new way, to plunge into the flow of the narrative —[and, so to speak,] to rea[d] with [his] fingers” (in Wood)—, thus encapsulating the physicality of the enterprise and completes the work. This assertion reminds us of Zimmer’s statement when he clearly contends that the construction of a book proves a physical, enduring activity: “I wrote the book in less months. The manuscript came to more than three hundred pages, and every one of those pages was a struggle for me” (*Book of Illusions* 55). Hence, the recurrent visual image of the solitary writer, who, caught in a fundamental crisis, “exiles himself in order to find himself” (Shiloh 22), discovering simultaneously “the infinite possibilities of limited space” and the magic power of words (*Invention of Solitude* 89).

- 24 Like the neophyte imitating the creators and repeating the cosmogonic myth, Auster’s writer-characters thus perform, in turn, what the orphan and sadden poet himself did, alone, after his father’s sudden death, in his spare and uncomfortable little room at 6 Varick Street, New York. Out of a “position of intense personal despair” (Irwin 46), they “make the room a kind of mental uterus, [...] where the subject, in essence, gives birth to himself” (Bruckner 28) and to the book. While the enwombing room is portrayed as the metaphysical space of the author’s daily struggle, given the inadequacy between language and the world, to painfully transform thoughts into words, the scribe’s desk is turned into “a holy place, the most private sanctuary in the world” (*Oracle Night* 37), and thus is endowed with a spiritual and religious dimension. The end of the film might well legitimize, in this light, Auster’s “masculinist fantasy of self-generative creativity” (Fredman 1), in the same way as it justifies why “he keep[s] alive the symbols and rites necessary for renewing a life and for surviving the onslaught of change at the end of an age and at the beginning of a new era” (Meade 16). If he retains, in effect, “an eye for the symbolic and a feel for ritual” (Meade 16) as far as the very act of creation is concerned, he also portrays life, from *The New York Trilogy* to *Timbuktu*, as “[being] in itself an initiation” (*Sacred and Profane* 208). And if, like the neophyte, the protagonists of the trilogy, in their quest for spiritual purification, all “undergo a form of humiliation and degradation” (*Art of Hunger* 263), they eventually achieve to become someone else. While M.S. Fogg acquires his true identity by returning to the womb of mother Nature, he also turns Effing into a mentor who initiates him to the pictorial and the visual and the reading of the Self, of the Other and the World. Likewise Walt Rawley, in *Timbuktu*, under the supervision of the rather sadistic but benevolent Master Yehudi, embarks on a journey of personal training which takes the form of a series of rituals and on a voyage of self-discovery. *The Music of Chance* resembles the typical story of the Brothers Grimm, which Auster once summed up in the following terms: “a wanderer stumbles onto an opportunity to make his fortune; he travels to the ogre’s castle to test his luck, is tricked into staying there, and can win his freedom only by

performing a series of absurd tasks that the ogre invents for him” (interview quoted in *Art of Hunger* 312-312). As for Anna Blume’s universe, similarly to the urban landscape in which the canine protagonist of *Timbuktu* evolves, it is populated by “helpers” and “villains” (Propp 38), whereas both their pathways, composed of a series of various obstacles and trials, could be compared to that of the typical child protagonist of the fairy tale. But man’s capacity for renewal in general finds his best illustration in the person of the silent film actor Hector Man, in *The Book of Illusions*, whose initiatory pathway, from his downfall and devastating experiences to his final reincarnation as Hector Spelling, a film director, shows that life is an unending succession of births and rebirths. All in all, Auster depicts initiation in multiple ways in his fictional universe, whether the characters retreat into rooms in order to transform themselves into writers or artists or whether they endure rites of *passage* as they decide, after the loss of their beloved, to wander in the world or to be initiated by spiritual guides and mentors.

Conclusion

- 25 For Maria Tatar, “the idea of personal transformation emerges logically from a genre that draws ceaselessly on shape-shifting and metamorphosis” (Tatar 60). The same words could be used to summarize the unprecedented impact of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* “whose power to change [Paul Auster]—not least by frightening him into imagining alternate realities—had once overwhelmed him” (Tatar 59). “Even as the protagonist transforms himself, [the movie] seeks transformative effects, producing what [the American author] refers to as” (Tatar 60) “surprise and dislocation” (*Report* 115) and I would add, revelation. Like folktales, this key film “has the same staying power” (Tatar 59) for Auster: it anchors images, scenes and sites in the writer’s mind, “the sensations the story aroused in him were never to leave, [and above else,] it blazed his creative imagination”, and “[l]ike so many young fairy-tale protagonists, Auster found himself experiencing a shudder of pleasure and fear” (Tatar 59). The folkloric—and nevertheless modernized—vision of the hero’s enchantment, submitted to a variation in form, and spell bounded to gradually disappear, combined with the no less common *cliché* of the fairytale child protagonist imprisoned both in his dungeon-like body and in a dark, small space conveys a symbolic message: “all of these images”, as Max Lüthi contends, “have a literal meaning but conceal and manifest something of general significance” (*European Folktale* 94). Whereas the protagonist’s metamorphosis calls to man’s propensity to become someone else and, at the same time, “can preserve dim memory of cruel rites of sacrifice” (*European Folktale* 94), his confinement in the room reveals to the viewer/reader both the function of initiation—and hence, that the true dimension of human life resides in spirituality—and that “it is through stories that we struggle to make sense of the world” (Irwin 46). Underlying the stunning phenomenon of Carey’s physical metamorphosis, in other words, “lie the bones and sinews of initiatory rites and symbols” (Meade 9), while his being entrapped in the room, takes the value and comes to constitute an “*imago mundi*” (*Sacred and Profane* 52).
- 26 Remembering watching *The Shrinking Man*, Auster understands that initiation, “as an elemental pattern or archetypal style, is a whole way of seeing into world, one that sees death as pan as the fabric of life” (Meade 8). And, “[s]ince nothing has a prior meaning—this is the very curse of modernity—the self, like solitude and tradition, must [thus]

be literally invented and recreated” (Bruckner 30). Like the Brothers Grimm who once “refashioned, reconfigured and often profoundly reinvented and, hence transformed a record of local culture into a global archive” (Tatar 57), Auster therefore refashions, reconfigures and reinvents the genre of the novel. If he indubitably derives his inspiration from ancient forms of literature and from the initially religious experience of initiation, he nevertheless adapts his fictions to fit the complexity of American society so as to be able to re-enchant the world and to overcome urban predicaments. In the legendary room, which conciliates Auster’s vision of initiation, his approach to the self and the modern world, a transcendental, “metaphysical space is created where everything becomes possible” (Fredman 5). And like Scheherazade who is aware that the end of the story signifies the end of her life, the creator and his characters find in writing an antidote to death, for they forestall nothing but the moment of being silent. What if, for Paul Auster, “going back to the origins”, retreating to the room signified to be reborn to thousands of possibilities, as his recent fiction, *4 3 2 1*, exemplifies it? This is why he “will never renounce the joy of telling us stories of birth and rebirths” (Duperray 42).

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NOTES

1. All translations are mine unless stated otherwise.
 2. "Pages for Kafka on the fiftieth anniversary of his death", in *The Art of Hunger*.
 3. "The Art of Hunger", which gave its title to the eponymous volume.
 4. In an interview given to Ashton Appelwhite in 1994, Auster, when asked about which writers have influenced him the most, cites "the anonymous men and women who invented the fairy tales we still tell each other today, [...] the whole oral tradition that started the moment men learned how to talk" ("An Interview with Paul Auster" in Hutchisson 98).
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ABSTRACTS

The Incredible Shrinking Man, one of the two "written films" (quoted in Gonzalès 18) that Auster narrates in *Report from the Interior*, turns the book, as in *The Book of Illusions*, into a virtual screen, showing how influential the 1957 Universal Pictures production was to fabricate both Auster's auctorial identity and his various characters' identities. *The Incredible Shrinking Man* exclusively focuses on the physical metamorphosis of the protagonist who is submitted to a sudden, corporeal diminishment, and then on his rebirth at a higher state of consciousness: after dying to his old self, he struggles to survive, overcoming obstacles and trials as he is confined in the cellar of his own house. The plot undeniably recalls the process of regression, the so-called "art of hunger" that most Austerian protagonists experience. It also casts a light on the theme of the depletion of material resources which pervades Auster's fictions and conveys, in multiple ways, the idea of "a return to origins" as Mircea Eliade, for instance, analyzed it. Carey's initiatory and transformative adventure, which resembles a fairy tale, explains, at least partly, Auster's fascination for this genre which has always inspired him, and Auster's analysis of the film in *Report from the Interior* unveils his vision on initiation, on life and fiction, along with his obsession with enclosed spaces.

The Incredible Shrinking Man, l'un des deux « written films » qu'Auster raconte et analyse dans *Report from the Interior*, transforme le second volet de ce livre autobiographique en un écran virtuel et révèle combien ce film de 1957 a contribué à façonner son identité auctoriale et à fabriquer l'identité de nombre de ses personnages. Cette production d'Universal Pictures relate en premier lieu la métamorphose physique du personnage, soudain condamné à voir son corps rétrécir constamment, puis sa mort et sa renaissance métaphorique tandis qu'il essaie de survivre et d'affronter obstacles et épreuves, confiné dans sa propre cave devenue un territoire hostile. Le scénario illustre l'entreprise d'auto-effacement à laquelle bon nombre de personnages austériens font face, évoque le thème de l'amenuisement des ressources matérielles, omniprésent

au sein de la fiction de l'auteur, et véhicule, de multiples façons, l'image « d'un retour aux origines » tel que Mircea Eliade, notamment, l'a analysé. L'aventure initiatique et transformatrice de Carey, qui s'apparente à l'intrigue classique d'un conte de fées, explique, du moins en partie, pourquoi Auster est fasciné par ce genre qu'il a souvent souligné comme l'une de ses influences majeures. Comme bien des contes de fées, le film dévoile en effet une vision du processus d'initiation, de la vie et du récit qu'Auster partage et rejoint son penchant pour les endroits clos.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Paul Auster, L'Homme qui rétrécit, Excursions dans la zone intérieure, conte de fées, initiation, métamorphose

Keywords: Paul Auster, The Incredible Shrinking Man, Report from the Interior, fairytale, initiation, metamorphosis

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